

The Gentleman's Almanac: Don Bosco's Venture Into Popular Education

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When New Year's Day dawned in Turin in 1854, the subscribers to Don Bosco's *Catholic Readings (Letture Cattoliche)* were in for a pleasant and unexpected surprise. Each subscriber received a free copy of his latest publication, *The Gentleman's Almanac (Il Galantuomo)*.¹ However, giving away free copies of the almanac was not entirely his own idea. The Waldenses,²

¹ Throughout this article the English translation for *Il Galantuomo*, "*The Gentleman's Almanac*", will generally be used when reference is to the printed almanac. However, when the term "Galantuomo" is retained, it will refer directly to the editor who used that name in referring to himself when addressing his readers. In the first issue the full title of Don Bosco's almanac was: *Il Galantuomo—Almanacco Nazionale pel 1854 (A National Almanac for the Year 1854)*.

² The Waldenses (French Vaudois, Italian Valdesi) had inhabited the Alpine valleys west of Turin for centuries. They long suffered persecution and discrimination at the hands of the Dukes of Savoy and of frenetic ecclesiastics. Victor Amadeus II (1675-1730) especially proscribed the Vaudois and stripped them of their legal rights. The Waldenses broke with the Catholic Church after the Synod of Verona (1184) when they rejected some of the seven sacraments and the notion of purgatory. Their views were based on a simplified biblicism, moral rigor, and criticism of the abuses of the contemporary church. In the United States they established small communities in Missouri, Texas, and Utah, and most importantly around Valdese, in North Carolina, now a thriving industrial town whose population around 3,000 is still largely Waldensian. For a sympathetic historical treatment of the Waldenses, see

an aggressive Piedmontese fundamentalist sect, had hit upon this unique way of proselytizing for new members by making their own almanac, *The Family Friend*, available to the public—whether they wanted it or not.³

The Waldenses gave away a free copy of their almanac to everyone they met. They left their publication on doorsteps, threw them through open windows and doors, quietly placed them in shops and stores throughout the city. A gullible public read them unsuspectingly. Some readers were soon convinced that it was a good and pious work.⁴

The Waldenses' lively publication quickly grabbed the reading public's attention. Moreover, since it was distributed at no cost to the reader it soon acquired a wide audience. Its success not only disturbed Don Bosco, but stirred him into action. He recognized a good idea when he saw one.

Don Bosco's biographer, John Baptist Lemoyne, observed that the growing popularity of *The Family Friend* gave Don Bosco some uneasy moments, for he viewed its contents as unsettling the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Catholic populace. To shield the unsuspecting faithful from what he believed was an insidious threat to their religion, he decided to counterattack with an almanac of his own.

Don Bosco saw the almanac [of the Waldenses] as a subtle undermining of the peoples' faith. ... So he decided to meet their propaganda ploy head-on. To unmask this false "Friend",

Geoffrey Symcox, *Victor Amadeus II: Absolutism in the Savoyard State 1675-1730*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983. For years there was unrelenting feuding between Don Bosco and the Waldenses with no quarter given. Don Bosco constantly battled them in the press while the Waldenses went one step further. They hired a hit man to do him in. But the gunman's aim was off by a matter of inches.

³*Amico di Casa, Almanacco Popolare Illustrato (The Family Friend, An Illustrated Peoples' Almanac)* was first published in Turin in the autumn of 1853. It was edited by the Genovese Costantino Rota. The editorial office was later moved to Florence (1862-1870) where the ex-priest Luigi de Sanctis collaborated in its production. For Don Bosco's unsuccessful efforts to make De Sanctis see the error of his ways see John Lemoyne, *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* (English version) volume 5 chapter 14. The English version of Lemoyne's *Memorie Biografiche* will henceforth be cited as: Lemoyne, English version.

⁴Giovanni Batt. Lemoyne, *Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*, vol.4, 644.

he resorted to publishing an attractive almanac of his own which he called the *Galantuomo*. In early 1853 he had outlined his plan for its publication to several intimate friends, and they responded to the idea with enthusiasm.⁵

Although Don Bosco's associates were strongly supportive of his project of publishing an almanac, what to call the publication became the first hurdle the editor had to overcome. Everyone seemed to have his own opinion on what to name the new publication. Someone suggested *The True Family Friend*, to offset the success which the Waldenses' almanac was enjoying. Besides, it was averred, this title would serve notice that Don Bosco too had thrown his hat into the ring. But he would have none of it. The last thing he wanted was to echo in any way his rivals' title, thereby giving their almanac free publicity. His own publication would have to have ear-appeal as well as eye-appeal he insisted. "Lots of people often are attracted to read something because it has a catchy title."⁶

Other titles were thrown into the hopper: *The Peoples' Almanac*, *The Young Peoples' Almanac*, *The Workers' Almanac*. But they were promptly if courteously dismissed. Finally, a few weeks before the almanac went to press, Don Bosco proffered the title he had intended to use all along. After praising the various suggestions that had been proposed, notwithstanding their merit, he had asked them to support his own brainchild. The almanac would be entitled, *Il Galantuomo*. Furthermore, he informed his associates that he intended to send each subscriber of *The Catholic Readings* a free copy of his almanac as a New Year's gift. Don Bosco then proceeded to pour all his energies into his new project, and by October of 1853 the copy for the first issue of *The Gentleman's Almanac* was ready for the printers.

The origin of the almanac is shrouded in time. It did not become a prominent type of reading matter to educate the populace until the introduction of printing in Western Europe in the 16th century. By the middle of the 19th century the lowly almanac had evolved into a major instrument of public

⁵ *Ibid.* 645.

⁶ *Ibid.* 645.

instruction. Don Bosco was to use his publication not only to counter what he considered injurious Protestant propaganda, but also as a vehicle of popular education. A century before, Benjamin Franklin had observed that his *Poor Richard's Almanac* could serve as a "proper medium for conveying instruction among the common people."⁷ It was a purpose shared by propagandists and printers alike. *The Gentleman's Almanac* in time would do no less.

In Don Bosco's enterprising hands, the range and content of his almanac broadened significantly. It became a gallimaufry of delightful bits and pieces of entertainment, instruction, and inspiration. Each issue of *The Gentleman's Almanac* included snippets of prose and poetry, brief essays on topics from anatomy to zoology, a wealth of vigorous religious polemic, delightful "bagatelles", amusing and instructive anecdotes, and every manner of practical advice from how to brush your teeth to the ill effects of inhaling secondhand smoke.⁸

⁷ Don Bosco was no stranger to Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* which he quotes in the 1865 edition of *The Gentleman's Almanac* (p.76). The subject: "How to be happy in life."

⁸ The Galantuomo, for example, admonished his readers that if they took good care of their teeth, their teeth would take good care of them. His "Directions for Dental Care" gave an optimistic if primitive formula for dental hygiene:

Do you have healthy teeth? If you have, take good care of them. Are your teeth giving you trouble? Then start taking care of them at once before they get any worse. Follow this simple technique to prevent future toothaches. All you need is a little wine alcohol and water. Mix half a spoonful of alcohol into two tablespoonsful of warm water. Now dampen a piece of cloth into this mixture and dab it lightly into some very fine powder or pumice. Next rub your teeth vigorously and thoroughly. Do this several times a week. If you are faithful to this routine, you will still have every tooth in your head when you reach a ripe old age. (*The Gentleman's Almanac for 1870*, p.63)

In almost every issue the Galantuomo dispensed helpful hints and remedies to maintain a healthy life. Some of them are amazingly relevant even for today. For instance, he warned innocent nonsmokers of the hazards of inhaling secondhand smoke and recited the research of Doctor Gustav Le Bon who cautioned nonsmokers to keep their distance from cigar smoke for they would be subject to dire consequences ranging from paralysis to loss of memory to fallen arches. (*The Gentleman's Almanac for 1878*, 48-49).

Perhaps Moses Coit Tyler's oft-quoted remark traced the sense of respectability that the lowly almanac had attained by the time Don Bosco's own *Il Galantuomo* appeared in print:

No one who would penetrate to the core of a country's customs and literature, and who would read in them the history of its people in whose minds they took root and from whose minds they grew, may by any means turn away in lofty literary scorn from the almanac—most despised, most prolific, most indispensable of books, which every man uses, and no man praises; the very quack-clown, pack-horse, and pariah of modern literature, yet the one universal book; the supreme and only literary necessity even in households where the Bible and the newspaper are still undesired or unattainable luxuries.⁹

In its beginnings the almanac was essentially a calendar which supplied daily and seasonal information for the use of farmers, navigators, and others whose work depended upon the weather and other changing natural conditions. The important information offered for each day of the year was astronomical data about such things as the times of sunrise and sunset, conjunction of the planets and phases of the moon. Accompanying such astronomical information was practical advice. This included recommendations of the best dates for planting crops or catching fish. Of course, weather predictions were a prominent feature of almanacs, and other "prognostications" were included since astrological influences were presumed to be important in a person's daily affairs.

By the mid-nineteenth century the almanac, both in the Old and New World, had become a form of popular education that was read by more people than any other. This homely literary creature, which originally arose to meet the common reader's need for some sort of calendar, in time became avidly read for the wide assortment of its contents. It became Everyman's teacher and textbook. Don Bosco too used his almanac as a popular utilitarian form of education. It contained astronomical data, such as the dates and phases of the moon, a schedule of tides and eclipses, a list of holidays and holydays, with its religious calendar as a principal feature. In time it went much further. The farmer found instructions when to sow and when to reap, how to care for silkworms and livestock, and how to get a bigger potato yield. The leather-apron man learned

⁹Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature*. G.P. Putnam and Sons, New York, 2 vols., 1878. Vol. 2, 120.

the latest techniques of his trade or craft; the housewife was taught how to plant her garden and to put up fruit preserves. For the pious and devout there were inspirational capsule biographies of saints, reports of recent miraculous events, and news on newly canonized saints. For everybody there was a generous and steady diet of jokes and jests, rib-tickling anecdotes and amusing stories, and a plentiful supply of humorous verses—frequently written by Don Bosco himself. By the 1860s, that period of scientific breakthroughs and labor-saving devices, *The Gentleman's Almanac* took on a scientific flavor as it reported the latest inventions and discoveries. With some pride biographer John Lemoyne noted that Don Bosco's almanac had the distinction of being "... the first national Catholic almanac ever published in Europe."¹⁰

The first issue of *The Gentleman's Almanac* (for 1854), a New Year's surprise gift to subscribers of the *Catholic Readings*, had a press run of 16,000 copies—almost triple the circulation of the Waldenses' *Family Friend* which it was attempting to challenge. Its vest-pocket size (5 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches)—it could fit snugly into any gentleman's waistcoat pocket—made it a junior imitator of the modern pocket-size paperback. Its 115 pages comprised a potpourri of entries: a religious calendar, statistical information, a table for foreign money exchange, a lengthy and detailed instruction on the care and treatment of silkworms, a poet's musing under a spreading oak tree, a plaintive dirge from a work-weary plowman, a sprinkling of moral maxims, and an assortment of amusing anecdotes.

But it is the persona of the almanac's editor, masquerading behind the anonymity of "Il Galantuomo", that immediately intrigues the reader. His introductory soliloquy, which regales, inspires, and amuses his readers, sets the pattern for the almanac's format. In the first issue, this imaginary creation quickly comes to life as he introduces his family (wife and four children);

¹⁰John Lemoyne, *Memoirs* English version, vol.II, 413-414. However, this assertion is highly questionable and must be taken with reservations. Perhaps Lemoyne was not acquainted with the plethora of almanacs, both lay and religious, that had appeared in France since the early nineteenth century. In fact, in Turin, almost twenty years before the appearance of *Il Galantuomo*, the *Almanacco provinciale contenente le diocesi del Piemonte* was already in circulation in various dioceses of Piedmont. See *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere, ed Arti*. Bestetti e Tuminelli, Milano-Roma, 1929. Vol.2, 572.

explains his impoverished condition, not due to dissolute living he takes pains to explain, (he has just come through a crushing bankruptcy); reveals the reason for his constant change of residence (he's trying to keep a step ahead of his landlord and creditors).

The chatty Galantuomo then puts his readers at ease by assuring them that he will "... at no time preach to them. In matters that pertain to religion—go to your parish priest and he will take care of your spiritual needs. All you will hear from me will deal with matters that go into the making of a true gentleman."¹¹ It would be naive to believe that in subsequent issues of the almanac Don Bosco could resist "preaching" to his audience. But the Galantuomo, his alter ego, will do it painlessly, and in the process introduce his readers to that code of manners and morals that go into the forming of the Christian gentleman.

It is in these introductory monologues that the author is revealed as a master of the plain style: homely, but concrete, vivid, and on occasion even dramatic.¹² The literary quality of his style is graced by the common touch and couched in a language that is always simple, clear, and engaging.

Writing in an age which reveled in ornate Latinate prose and long-winded circuitous periods, the Galantuomo's musings and ramblings and perceptive insights cultivated simplicity in style and structure. Don Bosco never thought of himself as an author in the belletristic sense, although all his life he had a critical eye for style in both prose and poetry. Therefore, his *Almanac*, with its homespun wisdom and droll humor and religious underpinnings, is not directed to an erudite audience, but to the common man: the farmer, the leather-apron worker, the man in the street,—and on occasion to the long-suffering housewife.

Like most of the almanacs of his day, Don Bosco used his publication as a vehicle for popular education. But *The Gentleman's Almanac* had one ingredient which many similar almanacs lacked—a refreshing and pervasive sense

¹¹*Il Galantuomo: Almanacco Nazionale*, 1854, p. iv.

¹²An example of the Galantuomo's flair for the dramatic can be seen in *The Gentleman's Almanac* for 1856. In this issue in a dramatic flight of fancy he sets off for the front in the newly declared war in Crimea, despite the fact that he has been rejected in the draft ("too old, lame, blind in one eye, and hard-of-hearing"). It was his craving for adventure to go to Crimea and not for any bloodletting: "I was not anxious to kill (I couldn't even harm a fly); but I needed money to support what is left of my family." He then signs up as kitchen helper to a victualler who had a contract to provision the troops. Once in Crimea the Galantuomo experiences a series of narrow escapes and exciting adventures that make for fascinating reading.

of humor. The tongue-in-cheek jocularity, the chuckle-inducing stories and anecdotes, and the frequently rib-tickling bagatelles are intermittent reminders that life, no matter how drab, also has its lighter moments. For all the depressing ills that man is heir to, Don Bosco believed, laughter can be the best medicine.

For example, after a rather depressing recital of tortures that were inflicted upon martyrs for the Faith, the reader is presented with this bit of comic relief:

While eating lunch in a restaurant one afternoon, a priest was being constantly heckled with insulting remarks from some ne'er-do-wells at a nearby table. However, the good cleric appeared completely unflappable and ate his meal with obvious gusto. After he had dined and was leaving the restaurant, one of the hecklers, feeling that his friends had gone too far, approached the priest and said, "Reverend, I must admit that I have admired the way you took our baiting and insulting behavior without getting riled in the least." The priest smiled. "Oh, I wasn't bothered in the least by all those nasty remarks. In fact, I'm quite used to conduct like yours. You see, for the past fifteen years I've been the chaplain of the asylum for the insane down the road." ¹³

In his spadework in preparation for the first issue of his almanac, Don Bosco received strong support from the Piedmontese academic, Francesco Faà di Bruno. ¹⁴ But the latter's input has received scant recognition. Writing in

¹³*Il Galantuomo: Almanacco Nazionale*, 1874, 67-68.

¹⁴The man who bore the unwieldy name of Francesco Faà di Bruno was a multitalented native of Alessandria: soldier, scholar, educator, advocate of women's rights, priest and founder of several religious congregations, and in 1988 beatified by Pope John Paul II. Born of a noble family, he was destined for a military career and was enrolled in his youth at the Royal Military Academy in Turin. He saw action during the First War of Independence (1848-1849). The brutality and inhumanity he witnessed on the battlefield destroyed whatever military ambitions he may have nourished. At war's end he left the army with the rank of captain. Shortly after, he began his university studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. Some time later he returned to Turin and taught at the University of Turin without, however, acquiring full tenure because of his refusal to go along with the anticlerical policies that were dictated by the Masonic academics of that institution. At this time he became acquainted with Don Bosco and often served his Mass dressed in full military uniform of captain.

Tempio di Don Bosco, Salesian historian Natale Cerrato notes that not enough credit is given to this remarkable man's contribution. "To tell it like it is, it was he who gave Don Bosco's almanac a strong impulse, and it was his encouragement that helped propel it into print. ... He supplied Don Bosco with valuable research material and procured copies of various journals and almanacs for him to examine."¹⁵ So it was principally Don Bosco's pen and Faà di Bruno's penchant to supply valuable resource material that brought the first issue of *The Gentleman's Almanac* into existence.

January 1, 1854—An Almanac is Born

(Table of contents of first issue)

Pages

3-7 *The Galantuomo to His Readers:*

In an opening editorial monologue, which will set the pattern for all succeeding issues of the almanac, *Il Galantuomo* introduces himself to his readers:

A dynamic personality he became involved in numerous social and charitable activities which included a home for unwed mothers, a vocational school, and a retreat house. Because of his social awareness to improve the lot of working women in society, he fought for women's rights, especially to secure decent wages and dignity in the workforce. In the best sense of the word he could be considered a forerunner of today's feminist ideology. It was during these years that he founded the Institute of Saint Zita which cared for young girls entering early employment and for women of the working class.

Faà di Bruno was strongly encouraged by Don Bosco to enter the priesthood. However, opposition from Archbishop Gastaldi made him defer his decision for some time. At Don Bosco's urging he applied for a dispensation (he was 51 years of age) from Pius IX as a late vocation. It was granted, and he quietly left for Rome where he was ordained only after three months of study in 1876.

Despite his belated ordination he displayed an amazing energy. He founded the Little Sisters of our Lady of Suffrage (1881); edited numerous scientific works; put his advanced degree in mathematics to good use by erecting a church with a 150-foot tower which became an architectural marvel of the region.

Faà di Bruno died in the same year that marked Don Bosco's passing, March 27, 1888. He was beatified by Pope John Paul on September 25, 1988. P. Palazzini has captured both aspects of his saintly and scholarly life in a two-volume biography, *Francesco Faà di Bruno. Scienziato e Prete* (2 vols.), Roma, 1980.

¹⁵Natale Cerrato SDB, *Tempio di Don Bosco*, Castelnuovo Don Bosco, Italy. March, 1991, p.19.

Don't let my calling myself 'a gentleman' take you off guard, gentle reader. True, you know nothing about me, and are probably wondering at my presumption in calling myself a gentleman. Believe me, it is not smugness on my part. In fact, I may not even measure up to your expectations in this matter. But I am confident that in time I shall reach that distinction, and, hopefully, even induce many of you to follow in my footsteps. After all, what is a gentleman, but one who conscientiously fulfills his duties and responsibilities as expected of him by his Creator. You know what these duties are, so I am not going to preach to you about them. Your priest is better suited to that task than I....¹⁶

The Galantuomo then uses a ploy successfully adopted by Benjamin Franklin when his *Poor Richard's Almanack* first appeared in print more than a century before. Like Richard Saunders, Il Galantuomo plays on the sympathy of his readers by revealing his impoverished condition. Poor Richard, addressing the "middling people", who were his readers and obliged to work and save in order to prosper and survive, had written:

... the plain truth of the matter is, I am excessive poor, and my wife, good woman is, I tell her excessive proud; she cannot bear, she says, to sit spinning in her shift of tow while I do nothing but gaze at the stars; and she has threatened more than once to burn all my books if I do not make some

¹⁶ *Il Galantuomo, Almanacco Nazionale pel 1854*. Torino, iv.

profitable use of them for the good of my family.¹⁷

In much the same vein the Galantuomo informs his working-class readers that he too is destitute and hopes to win their benevolence by explaining what has brought him to the edge of penury. But he goes Richard Saunders one better. Unlike Franklin's creation who had only a wife to provide for, Il Galantuomo also has four hungry children to feed.

I own no carriage, and I always have to walk to where I'm going. Because of this my shoes are always worn down at the heels. I can't even pay my rent, so I'm constant in search of more affordable lodgings. I am so out of pocket at the moment that I can't even scrape up enough money to put enough polenta on the table to feed my wife and four children. There's a saying that all of us, rich and poor, are brothers under the skin. Don't you believe it. As for myself, I move only among the brotherhood of the very poor.¹⁸

If this woebegone account of the Galantuomo's plight does not pull at the reader's heartstrings, his situation gets even worse by the next issue of the almanac (1855). During the interval, Il Galantuomo loses his job, becomes overwhelmed with debts, and experiences the death of his wife and daughter in the cholera epidemic. The past year, he avers, has been a sobering time for him, and he begs his readers' forgiveness if there is a lack of sparkling wit and good humor in the pages of the 1855 issue. By this time only the most hard-hearted reader can fail to empathize with a man who is bravely struggling against all odds. And no doubt the same reader is eagerly anticipating the next edition of *The Gentleman's Almanac* to read how it all comes out.

¹⁷Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanacks*, Van Wyck Brooks, ed. Illustrations by Norman Rockwell. New York, 1964, p. 3.

¹⁸*Il Galantuomo*, op. cit., p. v.

8-20 *Religious Calendar*

Saints days and Church feastdays for the year are listed. Feastdays of special significance for the local gentry enumerated: Feast of the Holy Shroud (May 4); Miracle of the Blessed Sacrament which occurred in Turin (June 4); Commemoration of the feast of Our Lady of Consolation, patroness of Turin (June 6), etc.

21-25 *Statistical Information*

Don Bosco was indebted to Faà di Bruno for the meteorological and astronomical material found in these pages. The statistical data and information regarding the members of the royal family of Savoy, setting watches operating on mean solar times, etc. are also attributed to him.

26-47 *The Care and Cultivation of Silkworms*

More than 20 pages are devoted to this subject which reveals not only Don Bosco's venture into popular education but underlines the economic reality for the almanac readers, many of whom were engaged in the silk industry. In the 19th century Italy was a disadvantaged latecomer to the industrial revolution. It was a country poorly supplied with those natural resources, notably iron ore and coal, upon which the new industrial techniques of the industrialized nations were based. Piedmont's leading exports were raw and thrown silk which accounted for more than 70% of its exports. According to an estimate made by Antonio Fossati for 1848, the Kingdom's silk industry employed 56,000 workers, 39,000 reelers in 844 mills, 11,000 spinners connected with 156 shops, and 6,000 weavers employed by 36 establishments, most of whom worked at home. Little wonder that Don Bosco would devote extensive space in his almanac to a subject that touched the livelihood of so many people.¹⁹

¹⁹ In Don Bosco's early years the industrial life of Piedmont between 1800 and 1850 dragged on in limited, but not entirely hopeless, fashion. The bright spot was its silk industry. Two American scholars who have treated this subject in detail are: Robert Kent Greenfield, *Economics and Liberalism in the Risorgimento*, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1934; and Maurice F. Neufeld, *Italy: School for Awakening Countries*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1961

48-56 *Meteorological Data*

All almanacs of the day calculated the tides and changes of the moon, and even claimed to forecast the weather. They also furnished astrology for those who believed in it. Here again the almanac borrowed from Faà di Bruno's contributions.

57-70 *An Olio of Ballads, Dialectical Verse, and Nonsense Rhymes*

Even as a schoolboy John Bosco displayed a facile talent for versifying. "His companions marvelled at the ease with which he composed or even improvised poems. He never wanted for verses and rhymes," his biographer recounts. He seemed to have been gifted with the same legerdemain in rhyming as in conjuring. "On the name day of the [seminary] rector John was usually asked to present a poem in Greek composed for the occasion. Once when everyone expected something serious, he came out with a comic sonnet. The first verse was in Latin, the second in French, the third in Italian, the fourth in the Piedmontese dialect, and so on." Lemoyne then adds that although other compositions had been prepared for the festive occasion, the audience was so convulsed with laughter that the other students' poetic tributes were brought to a halt.²⁰

The twenty-three pages devoted to rhyme and verse in the first issue of the almanac consist mostly of jolly doggerel and humorous poems such as the lengthy (30 stanzas) serio-comic ballad of a poet musing "Under the Spreading Oak Tree". As the poet lounges under a gnarled and ancient oak, whose wind-caressed branches are atwitter with the song of birds, he deplors the exodus of peasants who are rushing off to the capital (Turin), willing to endure its sultry heat and noisome odors to improve their lot. In abandoning the idyllic countryside they risk both health and wealth and will end their days wasting away in some sanatorium.

The pages of the almanac, at least in its early years, provided Don Bosco with an outlet for his penchant for versifying. He could not resist

²⁰Lemoyne, *Memoirs* (English version), Vol.1, p.289.

the temptation to curb his doggerel. The 1855 issue of *The Gentleman's Almanac*, for example, ends with a delightful and lengthy (29 stanzas) poem in the Piedmontese dialect entitled "Meist Michel'l Saraje" ("Manly Michael, the Village Smithy") which has all the earmarks of Don Bosco's rhyme and reason. Well into the third decade of its publication, the almanac continued to be garnished with anonymous ditties and poems and ballads.²¹

71-95 *The Venerable Simon Talks to His Sons*

Six brief conversational-type exchanges between the saintly Simon and his sons. The underlying theme of these father-to-son talks: Learn to appreciate the peace and serenity of country life. Don't make the mistake of exchanging the farmer's rustic attire for the city workman's blouse. All of Simon's chats revolve around a variation of the same theme.

96-101 *Nine Anecdotes*

Nine anecdotes, each adorned with a moral, follow. It is difficult to conceive of Don Bosco telling a story in which God and religion are not central. In these brief stories morality is pervasive and insistent. Each anecdote addresses itself to some moral problem or points some moral lesson. Throughout future pages of the almanac, moral and religious values are heavily inculcated: honesty, piety, obedience to parents, courtesy, fidelity to religious duties. The following anecdote which appeared in *The Gentleman's Almanac* of 1854 illustrates that worldly wealth and peace of mind make for unlikely bedfellows:

One day a rich gentleman, who had traveled
the world in search of precious stones,

²¹ Whether Don Bosco was the real author of most of the poems that appeared in the early issues of *The Gentleman's Almanac* is strongly supported by Natale Cerrato. It is especially the Piedmontese ballads and jingles that are stamped with his hallmark. "Was Don Bosco the author of those dialectical poems and songs? Most probably he was. Although there is considerable variance in mood and subject in those pieces, Don Bosco's adroit sense of rhyming skill is patent. The style is also unmistakably his." Cerrato, op. cit., p. 22 .

visited his old friend, the village pastor. Proud of his priceless gem collection, he exhibited them in all their brilliance to the simple country priest. The latter gazed at them in wonderment but with mixed emotions. Returning the gem-studded casket with its incalculable fortune to its owner, the priest said: "It has certainly been a thrill for me to look at your priceless collection, and I suppose you will experience the same feeling when you do the same. But there will be one great difference between our shared experience. I will always enjoy the memory of having viewed something of great value and beauty while, on the other hand, your peace of mind will constantly be threatened with the fear that someone may steal your precious collection."

102-110

Saws and Maxims

Everyone derives intellectual pleasure from the pithy wisdom found in proverbs and maxims. In the first issue of the almanac there are almost ten pages of these "quotable quotes", each one, of course, intended to drive home some moral lesson. Future issues of *The Gentleman's Almanac* will be punctuated with these eye-catching aphorisms. A sampler from the first issue follows:

- A good book is like a good friend. It not only shares our little secrets, but also gives us sage counsel and sound advice.
- Just as wholesome food creates a healthy body, so is the soul nourished by our good acts done to help our neighbor.
- Laziness like rust can be very corrosive. If we neglect to use our mind and body they will become eroded; whereas a busy mind and an energetic body become strengthened and perform wonders when put to constant use.

Certainly the Galantuomo was anything but a killjoy. He firmly believed that people should enjoy the simple pleasures that regional and city fairs provided. He, therefore, supplies a long list of town and city fairs with their respective dates.

Don Bosco's use of his almanac as a vehicle to inform and instruct the populace was a resounding success, and its widespread distribution did not escape the attention of the Waldenses. The first run of 16,000 copies was triple the circulation of their *Family Almanac*. It also marked the beginning of a period of bitter feuding between the fundamentalists and the priest in Valdocco. Their hostility, however, was temporarily deflected by the cholera epidemic that swept through Piedmont several months later. The Galantuomo, in fact, described the ravages of the epidemic in the succeeding issue of the almanac and described how it had touched his own fictional family:

Thank God I've survived the year, but it was not easy. These past twelve months have brought me nothing but grief and misery. I lost my job, ran out of money, and piled up a mountain of debts. To make matters worse the cholera epidemic that has recently hit our city has devastated our neighborhood. Ten of my friends, all my own age (I'm 40), were swept away by this fearsome disease. ... and just when I thought the worst was over, it took the life of my own son.²²

²²The Galantuomo's loss may have been fiction, but the frightening number of people who lost their lives in that cholera epidemic was a grim reality. The appalling conditions in which the poor lived and were housed provide one explanation of the vulnerability of new as well as the older Italian cities to the cholera epidemic that first struck the peninsula in the 1830s. Teresio Bosco (*Una biografia nuova*, Torino, 1979, p.240) records that that year the epidemic had its start in Liguria and in Genoa 3000 victims perished. By the end of July the Royal Family hastily left Turin for the safety of their summer castle in Caselette. Shortly after the epidemic invaded the capital and in one month alone 500 of the 800 stricken victims perished.

When the next issue of the almanac appeared the cholera epidemic in Turin had waned. Shortly after, the war of words between the Waldenses and Don Bosco heated up anew.²³ Don Bosco found himself targeted in the 1855 issue of *The Family Friend*. Though the references to him are clothed in ambiguity, there was no doubt as to the target:

Recently some clerical publications [read *The Catholic Readings*] have been pointing accusing fingers at our interpretation of religious doctrines and teachings. Someone [read Don Bosco] has even branded us as heretics. If preaching that Christ is the only mediator between God and man, then we plead guilty. And we will continue in our so-called "obstinacy" as long as we have the Bible on our side. For the Bible is that same source of truth which the Catholic Church continues to deny its members.

Further on, the name-calling was not so oblique. Don Bosco is pointed to as another "Don Basilio"—a character in a then popular picaresque French novel which supplied the plot for Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. In the novel Don Basilio is portrayed as a shameless money-grubbing and conniving priest who fleeces his poor congregation while they are alive, and separates them from their hard-earned lifesavings when they die.

If the Galantuomo was stung by such unfounded allegations, like a true gentleman, he did not attempt to retaliate in kind. But the activities of the Waldenses were never far from Don Bosco's pen. And in the pages of the almanac there are frequent cautionary anecdotes alerting the faithful to their

²³The internecine war of words between the clergy of Piedmont and the Waldenses was peaking when the first issues of *The Gentleman's Almanac* were published. A decade earlier such a confrontation would have been unthinkable since the Waldenses were a proscribed sect. But in 1848 King Carlo Alberto had granted Piedmont its first constitution. It was conceded with reluctance and in a moment of acute emergency. Although the constitution, known as the *statuto*, made "The apostolic Roman Catholic religion the only religion of the state," it also paved the way for religious toleration in Piedmont, for "other cults are tolerated, in conformity with the law." A good portion of "The Statuto: the Constitution of Piedmont-Sardinia, March 4, 1848" can be found in Denis Mack Smith's, *The Making of Italy 1796-1870*, New York, 1968, pp. 136-139. For an original and thought-provoking study of the Protestant presence in Italy during the Risorgimento which emphasizes the Waldensian role in Piedmont, the reader is directed to Giorgio Spini's *Risorgimento e protestanti*, Milan, 1989, 2d rev. ed.

sinister tactics. In fact, Don Bosco tried, unsuccessfully, to convert the co-editor of *The Family Almanac*, Louis DeSanctis, back to the Faith. An unfrocked priest, De Sanctis, now burdened with the support of a wife and family, genuinely appreciated his efforts to help him straighten out his life, but to no avail.

An emerging socio-religious problem in Risorgimento Italy that Don Bosco often addressed in the pages of his almanac, sometimes with subtlety sometimes with broad humor, was anticlericalism. When the bill known as the Law of the Convents became law in 1855, a pervasive rise in anticlericalism throughout Piedmont made every priest and religious fair game for harassment and taunts.²⁴ By the mid-fifties the clergy was often lampooned in the liberal press and frequently jeered and pelted with stones in the streets.

Anticlericalism is a word laden with meaning. To some it conjures up the idea of a wealthy, tyrannical, and self-serving clergy under attack from the protagonists of democracy, decency, and freedom. To some it brings to mind a cabal of willful conspirators bent upon destroying God's representatives on earth. These images are extremes, of course, and between them is a complex spectrum of anticlerical thought and action.

During Don Bosco's early years anticlericalism was fused with nationalism. And many priests, whether they liked it or not, often found themselves caught between the rock and a hard place. Unlike French anticlericalism with its program aimed primarily to deprive the Church of its special privileges in government and society, the Italy of Don Bosco in the 1850s had no such program. Its main objective was to counter the pope's claim as ruler of the Papal States. In this case many Italians were anticlerical: conservatives, no less than liberals and radicals. 'If you are Catholic', the liberals charged, 'you obey the pope; and if you obey the pope, you desire the dissolution of Italian unity, hence you are enemies of your country.'²⁵ It was this mind-set

²⁴The Law of the Convents, also known as "Le Legge Rattazzi" was promulgated the year following the first issue of *The Gentleman's Almanac*. This legislation was far more devastating for the Piedmontese church than the "Siccardi Laws" which had been enacted five years earlier. The Law of the Convents suppressed all religious orders not devoted to teaching, preaching, or nursing. It also legislated that no new religious orders could be established without state approval. As a consequence 334 religious institutions were closed and 5,456 religious found themselves "displaced".

²⁵J. Salwyn Schapiro, *Anticlericalism: Conflict Between Church and State in France, Italy, and Spain*. Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 79-

that almost wholly identified Italian anticlericalism with the preservation of national unity.

Another factor that contributed to the surge of anticlericalism was the reputed wealth of the higher clergy and the institutional Church. To offset this unfavorable image of the priest, Don Bosco often printed anecdotes in the almanac that tried to cast the hard-working, self-sacrificing country priest in a sympathetic light.

Pietro Stella notes that one of the principal reasons that hastened the legislation that eventually brought on the confiscation of Church property in Piedmont was the hierarchy's blindness towards their impoverished priests. Piedmont's "tenacious prelates" he argues, would not accept a more equitable distribution of wealth among the clergy. He then compares these affluent fat-cat prelates to the "Levite of old who would not stop to assuage the wounds of the man who had been set upon by bandits." Such callous treatment, Stella avers, "caused scandal and rebelliousness among those who saw such measures as acts of violent sacrilege."²⁶

Stella's assessment of the high-living prelates and the clergy of low estate was not far off the mark. The archbishop of Turin, for example, received a salary of 100,000 lire per annum (paid by the State), while the impecunious country pastor had to survive on a mere pittance of 300 per year.²⁷ His analogy

²⁶Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, New Rochelle, 1985, p. 135.

²⁷The wealth of the Church, before many of its holdings and institutions were usurped by the Piedmontese government, was extraordinary. Its estimated income from lands and endowments, wholly apart from what it received in fees, collections, or subsidies was about one-thirteenth of the national revenue. And the individual income of the hierarchy was on the same scale. A table prepared by A.J. Whyte for his book on Cavour shows the relative amounts:

The archbishop of Turin	100,000 lire
Director of national bank	10,000
The bishops (average)	30,000
Cabinet ministers	15,000
Chief Justice of highest court	12,000
Counsellor of State	8,000
Vice-admiral	8,000
Intendant General (Highest civil servant)	7,500

Meanwhile, many city and country pastors in Piedmont were paid almost nothing. The Law of the Convents proposed to reduce the salaries of archbishops to 18,000 and the bishops to 12,000, and to use the balance to pay the poorer priests. See George Martin, *The Red Shirt and the Cross of Savoy*, New York, 1969, pp. 436-

of the Levite who ignored the suffering of the Poor Samaritan is an interesting one. In the 1876 issue of *The Gentleman's Almanac* Don Bosco attempted to come to the rescue of the frequently maligned priest in this amusing and even poignant anecdote.

“The Pastor’s Trousers”

Once upon a time a solitary figure was seen trudging along a dusty country road at dusk. It was the pastor of a neighboring parish. Oblivious to everything around him he was piously reading his breviary as he plodded along. Two young military officers, whose regiment was bivouacked in a nearby town, approached him from behind. Walking at a rapid pace they quickly overtook him. The sight of the priest in his black soutane riled one of them:

“I can’t stand the sight of priests,” he said.

“Neither can I,” his companion responded. “Religion may be all right for women and children, but I have no need for it. Going to church doesn’t make one any better than someone who doesn’t go. In fact, I know some church-going folks who are real scoundrels.”

He had no sooner uttered these words when a beggar, halfhidden in the brush, stepped out, stopped the two officials and begged for alms. He was a pitiful sight: half-starved, scrawny, dressed in rags. Touched with pity, they dropped a few coins in his tattered cap.

“I’ll bet you,” said one, that the priest we just passed a few minutes ago down the road won’t give him a cent when he comes by. Let’s stop and see what happens.”

“A good idea,” chimed in the other. “But let’s get out of sight and hide behind that tree so he won’t see us. You know how

437. And A.J. Whyte, *The Political Life and Letters of Cavour*, Oxford University Press, 1930.

priests are. They can be very generous when somebody's watching them. But it's a different story when there's no one around."

They had no sooner screened themselves behind a tree when the priest, still rapt in his prayerbook, came upon the unfortunate beggar. The pitiful creature's plea for help brought the priest to a stop. He looked upon the unfortunate man with deep compassion. After rummaging through his pockets, he shook his head sadly. "My dear friend, I'm afraid I don't have a cent to my name."

With an I-told-you-so grin, the two young men nudged each other. Again the priest went through his pockets. Perhaps he had overlooked something. Nothing. Then he realized that the beggar who stood before him was virtually half naked and dressed in rags. He asked, "Is that all you have to wear?" The man nodded.

Looking cautiously up and down the road, the priest said, "Wait here." He then disappeared quickly behind a clump of trees. He soon emerged, dangling his trousers over his arm. "Here, wear these. You need them more than I do. But don't tell a soul I gave them to you." When the beggar tried to blurt out his thanks, the priest cut him short with the words, "You had best be on your way—and just say a prayer for me."

Trouser-less, but modestly covered by his cassock, the priest bent anew over his prayerbook and continued his way down the road.

The following day the two officers who had so smugly anticipated an entirely different ending to the roadside incident they had witnessed, sheepishly appeared at the parish rectory. The priest's warm and genuine display of Christian charity had touched their hearts. In an effort to make amends for their rash judgment, they had come to make their confession.²⁸

Such anecdotes showing the nobler side of the clergy abound in the pages of the almanac.

Although Don Bosco was originally motivated to publish his almanac to counter the Waldenses' attack against Catholic doctrine and practice, and the Galantuomo took constant pains to instruct his readers in the Faith, the contents of each succeeding issue expanded its educational scope. As religious indoctrination continued to edify and instruct, the contents of the almanac increased the regular fare of world news and fascinating information. The spirit of

²⁸*Il Galantuomo—Almanacco Per L'Anno 1876*, 54-56.

the world and the world of the spirit commingled in attractive harmony. The reader of the almanac was alternately indoctrinated and educated.

As the years progressed, *The Gentleman's Almanac* had something for everybody. The reader kept up with the development of scientific achievements and medical breakthroughs: The introduction of gas-lit streets and thoroughfares in the capital (1856);²⁹ the invention of the telephone (1879) and the phonograph—the Galantuomo compared the two and predicted that the telephone would surpass the phonograph in importance. Important Church events throughout the world were reported: The canonization of the Japanese martyrs (1863); the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes (1878); pope-bashing in a Dublin theater (1877)—the actor had to retreat under a shower of hoots and assorted furniture. Items that whetted the curiosity of its readers appeared regularly: extraordinary feats of memory down the centuries (1874)—Themistocles knew every citizen of Athens by name; Pico della Mirandola had only to hear a poem once and he could repeat it word for word—backwards; Giuseppe Scaligero memorized Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* in just twenty-one days. Occasionally an exotic piece intrigued the reader like a report on the tigers of India (1874)—10,000 persons were killed by these animals every year it was noted. And for the housewife, do-it-yourself projects cropped up with regularity: how to put up fruit preserves for the winter (1876); how to get immediate relief from bee stings and insect bites.

As travel, business affairs, and new foundations cut into Don Bosco's workaday schedule, it was inevitable that the editing of his almanac had to be passed on to other hands. In Don Bosco's last years, John Baptist Francesia took over the reigns of *The Gentleman's Almanac*. Father Eugenio Valentini has observed that the new editor wrote with the same verve, charm, and humor as its original creator. "Of all the editors of the almanac who replaced Don Bosco in its publication, it was Francesia who best captured the Galantuomo's editorial style."³⁰

It was also Francesia who had the sad task of announcing the death of the original Galantuomo to its many loyal readers:

This has been a sad year for the Galantuomo, and I'm sure you know the reason why. January 31, 1888 marked the end of an

²⁹The year in parentheses indicates the year in which this item is found in *The Gentleman's Almanac*.

³⁰Eugenio Valentini, SDB, "Giovanni Battista Francesia Scrittore", *Salesianum* 38 (Jan-Mar):139.

era for our magazine. On that day I put aside my usual light-hearted and jovial self and accompanied my alter ego to his graveside. I am not ashamed to admit that I shed a few tears at the final resting place of the man from whose fertile imagination I sprang and to whom I owe what modest fame I enjoy. But most important is my debt for that bond of friendship that he has created between me and my many readers. To tell the truth, when I learned that Don Bosco was dying, I thought I would die with him. So if I am back again, it is only because he would have wanted it that way ... So your longtime friend, whom you have known through the years as the Galantuomo, will keep a stiff upper lip and, despite his painful loss, will carry on.³¹

And carry on he did. *The Gentleman's Almanac* continued publication well into the next century when in 1955 it changed its title to *The People's Almanac*. Ironically it was the same title Don Bosco had at first rejected 100 years before as being too dull and unappealing.

³¹Quoted in *Salesianum* 38 (Jan-Mar):139.