

THE METHODS ADOPTED BY THE AUTHORS OF THE «MEMORIE BIOGRAFICHE»

Francis DESRAMAUT

1. The «Memorie Biografiche» of Don Bosco

The nineteen volumes of the *Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*, published over a period of 40 years between 1898 and 1939, were the work of three successive Salesian priests: Giovanni Battista Lemoyne (volumes I-IX), Eugenio Ceria (volumes XI-XIX) and Angelo Amadei (volume X).¹ The close study of these volumes (about 16,000 pages) that seems to be required by the title of this lecture would itself require entire volumes. In 1987 the critical examination of one extract comprising 80 lines from volume IX forced me to write 24 pages in the journal «Ricerche Storiche Salesiane».² This Salesian bible is capable of occupying generations of future commentators for centuries, if they have a taste for it. The problems posed are at times as complex as those of the synoptic gospels. I shall limit myself to a few general observations concerning the authors, their sources and the way they used them.

2. The three authors of the «Memorie»

The *Memorie* were at first, and in a way have remained, the work of Giovanni Battista Lemoyne (1839-1916).³ He joined Don Bosco at Turin in 1864, two years after ordination, and immediately demonstrated a passionate loyalty to his master, becoming his personal secretary at Valdocco (Turin)

¹ The *Indice* volume, the work of Don Ernesto Foglio, appeared in 1948.

² Year 6 (1987) 81-104.

³ An extremely interesting study of this person in the scholarly article by P. BRAIDO and R. ARENAL LLATA, *Don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne attraverso 20 lettere a Don Michele Rua*, in RSS 7 (1988) 89-170.

between 1883 and 1888. In 1884 he undertook the composition and editing of the documents which later became the *Memorie Biografiche*. In 1885 the document was entitled: *Documenti per scrivere la storia di Don Giovanni Bosco, dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales e della Congregazione Salesiana* (Documents for the writing of the history of Don Bosco, the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales and of the Salesian Congregation). This general title was given to a collection of 45 ledgers with printed articles stuck in columns and covering the entire life of Don Bosco year by year, from his birth in 1815 to his death in 1888.

Don Lemoyne was a writer. An account of him, which can easily be verified, described him as a «biographer, a story-writer, a dramatist, and poet».⁴ He was a careful writer, the author of pleasing and tastefully constructed stories for the «Letture Cattoliche»; of moving pieces for the theatre; a «poet of worth», according to a description of him by Don Bosco; and finally, a holy priest. As for his gifts as an historian, these are revealed at once when one studies his methods of work in editing the *Memorie Biografiche*. From 1898 onwards the first 7 volumes appeared in swift succession (1898-1909). This *magnum opus* was followed by an important biography of Don Bosco in two volumes.⁵ Before his death he was able to produce only two more tomes of the *Memorie* and so only brought the account of Don Bosco's life up to 1870. Volume VIII came out in 1912 and volume IX appeared posthumously in 1917.

After Don Lemoyne's death in 1916, Angelo Amadei (1868-1945), who had been editor of the «Salesian Bulletin» for 8 years, was his natural successor in continuing the *Memorie Biografiche*. Don Amadei was a most zealous priest, constantly in his confessional in the basilica of Mary Help of Christians, where he attracted every kind of penitent. He was later described as a true «venator animarum».⁶ He was in his natural element when the great feasts were celebrated and when at work on editing edifying articles. He, too, produced some considerable works: a biography of Don Bosco in 1929, in which he reproduced the testimonies of those who knew him,⁷ a work that was later extended to two volumes;⁸ and a long biography of Don Rua, who was Don Bosco's first successor.⁹ Nevertheless, Don Amadei was not the real successor to Don Lemoyne, and it is not difficult to pick out the

⁴ Cf. *ibid.* 100.

⁵ *Vita del Venerabile Servo di Dio Giovanni Bosco fondatore della Pia Società Salesiana, dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice e dei Cooperatori Salesiani*, 2 vol., Torino 1911-1913, pp. 656 and 680.

⁶ Cf. E. VALENTINI, *Amadei Angelo* in: *Dizionario biografico dei Salesiani*, Torino, Ufficio Stampa Salesiano 1968, p. 17.

⁷ A. AMADEI, *Don Bosco e il suo apostolato*, Torino, SEI 1929, p. 810.

⁸ A. AMADEI, *op. cit.*, Torino, SEI 1940, vol. 2, pp. 526 and 560.

⁹ A. AMADEI, *Il Servo di Dio Michele Rua*, Torino, SEI, 1931-1934, vol. 3, pp. 848, 770 and 772.

reasons why: the punctiliousness and slowness with which he worked, if we accept the witness of the article entitled *Amadei Angelo* in the *Dizionario biografico dei Salesiani*; the variety of his duties, as described by himself in a letter which I found in the Salesian archives at Turin; the controversies over Don Bosco's sanctity in the affairs he had to speak about starting from 1871, going by the introduction to volume X of the *Memorie*, published long after the others in 1939.

In the year of Don Bosco's beatification (1929), the Salesian world noted with shocked surprise that the great history of the new «beatus» had stalled at the point it had reached when Don Lemoyne died. Eighteen years of Don Bosco's life had been amputated. There were complaints on all sides; only the Rector Major, Don Rinaldi, said nothing, as I was once informed by Don Ceria. Finally, in the summer of 1929, Don Eugenio Ceria was brought to Turin by Don Rinaldi, in the hope that the veteran writer might remedy the situation.¹⁰

Don Eugenio Ceria (1870-1957) was a professor of classics and director of *Gymnasium*, a didactical revue for secondary schools. During his long career he had mostly published commentaries on Greek and Latin authors, such as Lysias, Xenophon, Cicero, St. Jerome, Caesar, Vergil, Livy and others. At the age of 60, this distinguished man of letters, of calm and refined temperament, began a new life. Between 1930 and his death in 1957 he devoted himself exclusively to the history of the Salesians. Volumes XI to XIX of the *Memorie*, covering Don Bosco's life from 1875-1888, together with a supplement on the process of canonisation, appeared with praiseworthy speed between 1930 and 1939.

This remarkable man, with his enthusiasm for Don Bosco, went on to biographies of the saint's disciples (Mary Mazzarello, Don Rua, Don Beltrami, Don Rinaldi). He also produced valuable sketches of members of the «superior chapter» and of Salesian brothers, a splendid booklet on the Salesian cooperators and, finally, four thick volumes on the *Annali della Società Salesiana*, covering the years 1841-1921, and the *Epistolario* of Don Bosco. He died before he could witness the publication of the final volume of this last work.

For the canonisation, whilst still editing the *Memorie*, he had put together the life of Don Bosco in a de-luxe edition of one volume.¹¹ It was probably the best popular life of the saint produced in this century.

Don Ceria was a classical humanist in the strict sense of the phrase; he sought balance in his writings. His Ciceronian style was limpid and smooth.

¹⁰ See the notes about Don Ceria in: E. VALENTINI, *Don Eugenio Ceria*. Torino, SEI 1957; and *Ceria Eugenio* in: *Dizionario biografico dei Salesiani* 79-81.

¹¹ *San Giovanni Bosco nella vita e nelle opere*, illustrated by G.B. Gallizzi, Torino, SEI 1938, p. 444.

He loved things that were simple and beautiful and could describe them without any straining for effect. He was no slave to erudition. Volumes XI to XIX of the *Memorie* carry the imprint of his style.

3. The title of the work

The title of the first volume of the *Memorie* was as follows: *Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*, raccolte dal sac. salesiano Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, vol. I (The Biographical Memoirs of Don Giovanni Bosco, collected by the Salesian priest Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, vol. I).¹² The title, which was later transferred to the whole work with only the slightest modifications following Don Bosco's beatification and canonisation, reveals a certain modesty.¹³ Just as Don Bosco had not composed a history, in the strict sense, of his own work but rather *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, that is, *Memoirs as the basis for a history of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*, so too Don Lemoyne, judging by the title of the first volume, did not propose to write a real biography of the founder of the Salesians; he aimed to produce *Memorie Biografiche*, that is *Memoirs as a basis for a biography* of the holy priest of Turin.

But let us pass beyond the outer doors and enter the building. The first phrase of the preface reveals both the author's true intention and the kind of work he is writing: «With the deep affection of a brother I offer to my dear fellow Salesians this biography of our venerated father in Jesus Christ, Don Giovanni Bosco».¹⁴ Those words make it clear to us that his great volume on John Bosco's youth was offered to the Salesians as the introduction to a biography of Don Bosco.

4. Don Lemoyne's predominant influence upon the whole work

The speed with which Don Ceria finished the *Memorie* between 1930 and 1939 was due to the immense preparatory work done by Don Lemoyne and the unreserved confidence that Don Ceria had in him. We have to thank Giovanni Battista Lemoyne for the source documents of the *Memorie*, for the general plan and to a certain extent, even in the 10 volumes he did not personally edit, for the form given to the narrative. Accordingly, it is upon

¹² Ed. extra-commerciale, S. Benigno Canavese, Scuola Tipografica, Libreria Salesiana, 1898, pp. XXIV-532.

¹³ On this question see my book: *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne. Etude d'un ouvrage fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco*. Lyon, Maison d'études Saint-Jean-Bosco 1962, pp. 84-86.

¹⁴ MB I, p. VII.

his work that I shall dwell in this survey of the working method of the three authors of the *Memorie Biografiche*, even though he produced only the first 9 volumes.

5. His research and ordering of the documents

Research, interpretation and, finally, utilization of the documents are the three stages of any work and they reveal the professionalism of this biographer of Don Bosco.

Don Lemoyne's aim was to collect every document, however flimsy, that could serve to enrich his account of Don Bosco and his work. Notwithstanding the work's length, Lemoyne still considered it the «Story» of Don Bosco. It would be more or less true to say that he was concerned only with whatever was of narrative interest: building plans, photographs, account books, school registers – all such things of more specialised interest he tended to ignore. His preference was for eye-witness accounts, especially those of Don Bosco himself.

As rector of the college of Lanzo (1865-1877), Don Lemoyne had collected most carefully all Don Bosco's *good-night talks*, short discourses and letters to the boys of the school. When he became Don Bosco's secretary at Turin in December 1883, he began with the help of another ardent disciple, the painstaking archivist, Don Gioachino Berto (1847-1914), to gather together every scrap of information on their master. He questioned and evaluated witnesses of his past life. He was particularly interested in the stories about Don Bosco's mother, Margherita Occhiena, whose life he published in 1886. He had to clarify the contents of notebooks, exercise books and memoranda notes that were not sufficiently legible. Often, after elaborating some point in order to make the story easier to follow, he would start to classify his material, putting together clippings according to Don Bosco's chronology. These he organised in registers which he entitled *Documenti per scrivere* (Documents for writing) and which thus became an immense outline for his history of the great man. He began to assemble these registers in 1885, at a time when the collecting of such documentation was only starting. It thus becomes clear that for Don Lemoyne the work of investigation and of editing (in effect his *Documenti* were a first draft) proceeded side by side. As new material gradually came to light, he inserted the fragments into his registers. However, once the process of canonisation began his style of work entered a new phase; the depositions of witnesses, as fragmentary as the records, were made part of special dossiers which he prepared with a view to their eventual publication in various volumes of the *Memorie Biografiche*.

During the informative stage of Don Bosco's process of canonisation,

carried out at Turin in the eighteen nineties, Don Lemoyne enquired as closely as possible into the depositions that had been submitted. Contrary to the impression given in a footnote in his general introduction, he made use of those depositions in the very first volume of the *Memorie* (1898) covering the saint's youth.

Day by day we are more and more aware of the fact that the *Memorie Biografiche* are a huge collection of mosaics of biographical documents cut into various pieces and inserted into a run of stories that are divided in turn into chapters and volumes that are more or less homogeneous. Any account of the work should therefore involve an analysis of the mass of documentation on Don Bosco which was then accumulated, especially by Don Lemoyne. At this stage I can only list the principal components and add a few words on their interpretation.

The following were certainly written by Don Bosco himself: the *Memorie dell'Oratorio* describing the years 1815-1855; his spiritual testament,¹⁵ his circular letters and personal letters; his biographies of Luigi Comollo, Domenico Savio, Michele Magone, Francesco Besucco and Giuseppe Cafasso; manuscript or published accounts of his various enterprises: accounts of police searches, his journey to Rome in 1858, the consecration of the church of Mary Help of Christians and the «marvels» and «graces» attributed to her intercession there at Valdocco; the regulations and constitutions drawn up first for his work locally in Turin and later world-wide, for his Salesian congregation and the Union of Salesian Cooperators. Even his brief notes and outlines were collected by Don Berto and passed on to Don Lemoyne.

Further source material was provided by those who lived with Don Bosco or had contact with him and who recorded in writing what they had seen or heard. First among such testimonies is probably the *Storia dell'Oratorio*, serialised in the «Salesian Bulletin» by John Bonetti (1838-1891) during Don Bosco's lifetime. This was later published as a substantial book entitled *Cinque lustri dell'Oratorio Salesiano fondato dal Sac. Don Giovanni Bosco*.¹⁶ Then there was the series that appeared in the «Bulletin» during Don Bosco's last years on the *Passeggiate Autunnali*.

The minutes of the meetings of Salesian rectors, of the «superior chapter» and of the general chapters of 1877 and 1886 also formed part of the documentation collected by Don Lemoyne.

He accorded pride of place, however, to the notebooks and exercise books which recorded the memories and comments of the following wit-

¹⁵ Cf. the *Memorie dal 1841 al 1844-5-6*, published by Don Francesco Motto in RSS 4 (1985) 73-150.

¹⁶ Cf. G. BONETTI, *Cinque lustri dell'Oratorio salesiano fondato dal Sac. Don Giovanni Bosco*. Torino, Tipografia salesiana 1892, p. 774. Note that Don Lemoyne stuck columns from the «Bollettino» into the *Documenti* but not pages from the *Cinque lustri*, so the latter does not seem to have featured in the composition of the *Memorie Biografiche*.

nesses: Domenico Ruffino (1840-1865), Giovanni Bonetti (mentioned above), Antonio Sala (1836-1895), Gioachino Berto (already mentioned above) Giulio Barberis (1847-1927), Francesco Cerruti (1844-1917), Giovanni Garino (1845-1908), Giuseppe Lazzeri (1837-1910), Francesco Provera (1836-1874), Carlo Maria Viglietti (1864-1915), Pietro Enria (1841-1898), Giovanni Battista Francesia (1838-1930) and Secondo Marchisio (1857-1914)... Don Lemoyne himself should be added to this list, because, contrary to a persistent tradition, he did not systematically destroy his personal notes. Don Rua, too, had compiled a valuable *Libro dell'esperienza*, and a *Necrologio*, and had jotted down notes, often on minute scraps of paper. To this long list future historians will add the house chroniclers, though at times they were merely copyists: Gresino, Ghigliotto, Peloso, Dompè, Vignolo, Veronesi, together with others whose writing is distinguishable when one consults the collections of anecdotes or «dreams» preserved in the Salesian archives in Rome.

Obviously there is no point in saying generously all the witnesses are reliable; even less so each episode they relate and all the phrases of Don Bosco they pass on, as though their closeness to the hero of the story were an absolute guarantee of the objectivity, lucidity and finess... of what they highlight. These documents need to be "understood".

The house chronicles should be of particular interest for any commentator. In these one must distinguish first-hand reports from more or less distant recollections, the minutes of a meeting from subsequent impressions, direct testimony from indirect, a true dream from a mere parable, actual testimony from comment upon it, and finally, an original statement from its later elaboration. At this point one could quote hundreds, perhaps thousands of examples.

The note written by Don Rua on the title «Salesians»¹⁷ was not in fact a genuine minute of the meeting in January 1854 (despite the impression given by Don Lemoyne when he writes that Don Rua «recorded this in writing»); it was a note written by Don Rua, probably at the biographer's request, 40 or 50 years after the event.¹⁸ On his return from Rome in February 1870, Don Bosco gave his Salesians at Valdocco a long conference about his trip. This was recorded in a report which Don Lemoyne published in his *Documenti* in terms which suggest a careful auricular witness. But how many sketchy summaries we have of the saint's *good nights!*... When Bonetti between 1861 and 1863, or Viglietti between 1884 and 1885 set down from Don Bosco's own lips accounts of parts of his past life, quickly recording them in notebooks, they were dealing with eyewitness accounts, even though

¹⁷ Cf. MB V 9.

¹⁸ In fact Don Lemoyne ignored this when he prepared his *Documenti*, right down to 1891. Internal evidence confirms this late dating.

very long after the events related and, hence, open to all the memory's fanciful reconstructions of the past. On the other hand the same two witnesses also noted stories that circulated in Salesian circles which other people might have contested, had they known about them. It was a question of «things that people say», as Don Ruffino wrote, about certain anecdotes concerning Don Bosco. One of Giovanni Bonetti's notebooks (about 20 pages, of which only 10 are written on) contains 6 astounding happenings, all of vague origin: «The amazing conversion of an atheist»;¹⁹ «The boy raised from the dead»;²⁰ «The grey dog»;²¹ «The chestnuts»;²² «The multiplication of hosts».²³ These are anecdotes which, authentic or otherwise, were made known only long after they occurred. It would be wise to accord them no more credibility than would be given to stories told in support of an idea firmly held by a specific group of people.

Similar comments could be made about the depositions collected for Don Bosco's process of canonization and assembled in the *Memorie Biografiche*. Taken as a whole they were extremely precious and interesting. There was a whole procession of people in Turin, diocesan and Salesian priests, Salesian brothers and lay people: Giovanni Bertagna, Gioachino Berto, Secondo Marchisio, Giovanni Giacomelli, Felice Reviglio, Giacomo Manolino, Giuseppe Turco, Giovanni Filippello, Giorgio Moglia, Giacinto Ballesio, Angelo Savio, Francesco Dalmazzo, Giovanni Branda, Pietro Enria, Leonardo Murialdo, Giovanni Cagliari, Francesco Cerruti, Giovanni Battista Piano, Giuseppe Rossi, Giovanni Villa, Giovanni Battista Francesia, Luigi Piscetta, Giulio Barberis, Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Giovanni Bisio, Michele Rua, Giovanni Turchi, Ascanio Savio, Giovanni Battista Anfossi, Domenico Bongioanni, Giuseppe Corno, Antonio Berrone, and thirteen others, men and women, all specially assembled to clarify problems relating to the saint's miracles. Don Pietro Stella has tried to classify these witnesses with a view to assessing their testimonies. Ideally, one ought to follow the genesis of every element in these depositions, working back to the source of information and to the mental attitudes of each witness.

One must point out that the most absolute affirmations concerning Don Bosco's ascetical life come to us – with the exception of some more reliable information – from Don Berto, who was a scrupulous and even obsessive person. He and his confrère, Giulio Barberis, made long depositions during the process of canonization. These were based solely on the *Documenti* of Don Lemoyne, which they had been free to consult and copy at Valdocco. At times they adhered to them quite slavishly, with the result that examples

¹⁹ Cf. MB IV 156.

²⁰ Cf. MB III 495.

²¹ Cf. MB IV 416.

²² Cf. MB III 576.

²³ Cf. MB III 441.

of imprecision and even error find their way into the depositions in an elaborated rather than a corrected form. They obviously did this entirely in good faith. But all this indicates that several testimonies during the process of canonization had a complex history which needs to be known if one is to understand and evaluate the depositions.

Let me make another general observation. The so-called «definitive» form of house chronicles and minutes adopted by the author of the *Memorie* is often not the precise form in which they were written by their scribes. If one takes the house chronicles, the most interesting example is furnished by Carlo Maria Vigiotti's account of the last years of Don Bosco (1884-1888). Spread over numerous exercise books and frequently revised and recopied, this poses a multiplicity of problems for any historian. The earliest version emerges as the most reliable; however, some passages added later are not without interest for the knowledge of Don Bosco. As for the minutes, the secretary in question usually records what he hears or understands as the meeting unfolds. But later, in order to present an official, acceptable text, he adds, modifies or omits certain things. He does this work mostly on his own, sometimes in the council.

It seems to me that if we take the form of the minutes of the first session of the Salesian General Chapter of 1877, produced by Don Giulio Barberis, we shall find them most instructive for any historian and therefore for any biographer of Don Bosco. The first draft is full of phrases crossed out or added, and careful attention to these reveals the progress of the discussion. It is true that you can by preference single out various characteristic attitudes of those introducing corrections (and of Don Bosco first and foremost): in this case, the changes themselves, which are not merely formal, also merit careful examination.

6. The understanding and use of documentary sources

The truth of what I have just said did not seem to occur to Don Lemoyne or to his successors, Don Amadei and Don Ceria. For Don Lemoyne all that mattered was the «honesty» of the witnesses, a quality that he esteemed because of its moral connotations. He would accept an account of something when it had been thoroughly corrected and would set it out in a mode which attached equal importance to all details. After comparing parallel passages he would prune all items of information that were new to him and then slot them into the general pattern of his work, which he kept, as far as possible, strictly chronological. For Don Lemoyne (and let me remind you that the *Documenti* which he edited in this way covered the entire life of the saint and influenced the work of Don Amadei and Don Ceria) the best history of Don Bosco would be one that brought together the greatest number of

reliable testimonies. He felt he could overlook nothing, even if it were only a word or a phrase. This reverence for mere quantity seems to me to reveal an excessive drive to give his work «substance» and, together with other traits, betrays his «prescientific» approach.²⁴

Gaston Bachelard writes in a chapter of *L'obstacle substantialiste*: «as if by natural instinct the prescientific spirit piles up on an object everything in which that object has played a role, ignoring any hierarchy of importance in those roles. It directly links substance and different qualities, the superficial as well as the profound, the obvious as well as the hidden». Such a person is preoccupied «with the obvious external experience, but from the bottom of his heart he shies away from any critical examination».²⁵ Don Lemoyne collected all that he could learn from his sources and incorporated this data into his work, with the obvious risk of repeating the same fact several times, since it had come to him in different forms, and thus with the risk of duplicating or triplicating statements or events that occurred only once.²⁶

A few examples may be useful. When Don Bosco gave an account of his youth, for some obscure reason he never mentioned that he stayed, as a boy, at the Moglia farm at Moncucco, where he actually spent about 18 months between the ages of 13 and 14 in the years 1828 and 1829. When the inhabitants of the farm were questioned by the Salesian Secondo Marchisio in 1888 and later by the lawyers during the informative process in the nineties, all of them, Dorotea Moglia, Giovanni Moglia, Giorgio Moglia as those who had seen him, all talked at length about John Bosco's sojourn there. These country folk had been struck by one trait of the adolescent boy: John had refused to remain alone with the Moglia's baby girl, even though ordered to do so by Dorotea. When narrating this event Don Lemoyne was faced by no less than seven accounts, not counting two others that spoke in more general terms of this refusal.²⁷ He considered that, in this case, one of the witnesses put the refusal in a different way to that of the others, and, consequently, he made it a separate incident.²⁸ The statement is thus duplicated in the *Memorie Biografiche*. According to most testimonies the boy said

²⁴ Taking up the theme, ideas and vocabulary of G. BACHELARD, *La formation de l'esprit scientifique*. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective, 13^{ème} ed. (1^{ère} ed., 1938), Paris 1986, pp. 131-133.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁶ See *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne* 213-266, in the chapter on *La lecture et l'ordonnance de la matière*.

²⁷ Rossi testified: «Mothers of families entrusted the care of their children to him and Don Bosco did this very gladly, except when it was a question of little girls» (G. ROSSI, *Processo ordinario della Curia di Torino*, p. 2511). Were there really so many «mothers of families» at the Moglia farm?

²⁸ This deposition made, I think, by Giorgio Moglia was published by Don Lemoyne in the *Documenti* XI.III 3.

to Dorotea: «Give me as many boys as you like and I'll look after them, but I can't look after baby girls». The one particular deposition worded differently was: «I am not destined for this! John replied calmly».²⁹

This desire to include everything also duplicated the conversation of young John with Don Calosso in November 1829 as they walked along the road from Buttigliera to the farmhouse at Becchi. It is a well known episode. Don Calosso, amazed at the easy manner of a boy who was a stranger to him asked him to summarize what the preacher of the jubilee sermon had said. John did so.

Don Lemoyne had three sources at his disposal: a fragment of Don Bosco's *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, a fragment of a chronicle by Domenico Ruffino and a fragment of the *Annali* of Giovanni Bonetti – the latter closely resembling Don Ruffino's account. Each of these versions knew of only one such conversation but their stories did not perfectly match: the Ruffino-Bonetti versions differed from the account given in the *Memorie dell'Oratorio*. Moreover, in the *Memorie* the boy talked for «more than half an hour», whilst Ruffino had him repeating the sermon for only ten minutes. Faced by such a problem, the «substantialist» avid for every detail and thinking thus to serve the cause of truth, unhesitatingly records both versions.

It never occurred to Don Lemoyne that Don Bosco, writing 12 years after the earlier accounts of Bonetti-Ruffino (1861 and 1873 are the relevant dates), might use different words to describe that childhood memory of a sermon which he recalled simply as being on «the last things». Lemoyne has Don Bosco talking about the sermon «for more than half an hour», and then later has him talking about another sermon for ten minutes, a total therefore of about three quarters of an hour.³⁰

The two very similar cures of a paralysed lady at the consecration of the church of Mary Help of Christians in Turin in 1868 have a similar origin. The first one is derived from an account given to Don Lemoyne by Don Bosco in 1884;³¹ the second one, three pages later in volume IX of the *Memorie*, came from a brochure printed in the year of the consecration.³²

Other duplications, harder to uncover, are however almost equally certain. There is the episode of the boys who got soaked during an outing and were received by «cavaliere» Gonella: this appears in volume VI of the *Memorie Biografiche*, following Don Bosco's version in his life of Magone; it then reappears in volume VII, in a different year, based on an anecdote collected in 1884.³³

²⁹ Cf. MB I 199.

³⁰ Cf. MB I 177-178.

³¹ See Don Lemoyne's notebook, *Ricordi di gabinetto*, 22 February 1884. Included in the MB IX 257.

³² Cf. G. BOSCO, *Rimembranza di una solennità in onore di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino 1868, pp. 49-50. Included in the MB IX 260-261.

³³ MB VI 54, based on the *Vita Magone* (1861), chapter XII; also MB VII 278, based on

The instantaneous cure of a dying child which, according to eyewitnesses, occurred in Paris in the April of 1883, is narrated in the *Memorie Biografiche*, volume XVI, pp. 131-133; then it is repeated in the same volume, pp. 224-225, following a later version given to Don Evasio Rabagliati by a lady called Maria Ortega.³⁴ Here there is huge scope for the exercise of their wits by future Salesian historians...

7. Lack of critical awareness in interpreting the documents

It seems that our historian has confused two levels: the level of life, or of history as it was lived, and the level of narrative or history of life, including the documentation witnessing to that history. It is assumed that these two levels coincide, one mirroring the other; that the sources are a transparent medium, giving an unequivocal message, and that there is no real problem attached to understanding the peculiar nature of source documents. In actual fact «it is not so easy to understand a document, to know what it is, what it says and what it really means».³⁵

The author of Don Bosco's life forgets that his documentary sources are linked to individuals or groups of people, who spoke or wrote in a particular period, expressed their own point of view, overlooked details or changed some of them in order to be better understood (for what we now call «communication»); at times, in all good faith, imagined things and allowed their own emotions and desires to colour the overall picture. Anyone at all familiar with history foresees the consequences of cutting corners in the systematic interpretation of one's texts.

In reality, a text is an end product; it has to be weighed like a manufactured object. It can never be treated as if it were a transparent window opening into the reality or history of which it speaks.

If the naive method is applied to the Bible, one confuses didactic passages with historical narratives, legends with reality, popular tales with official letters, and so on. For our purpose let us take a random example, the story of the barber at Castelnuovo.

One day Don Bosco refused, or so it seemed, to allow a woman to shave him. The episode, which today greatly amuses commentators on his life, was

G.B. LEMOYNE, *Ricordi di gabinetto*, 22 February 1884. This is probably an example of duplication, though one cannot be certain.

³⁴ This refers to the cure of Bouillé's son, related in *Documenti* XXV 127, and based on *Ancien Magistrat*. It is confirmed by the chronicle of Charlotte Bethford and appears in the MB XVI 131-133. The case in question was the cure of an unspecified boy as told to Don Rabagliati by Maria Ortega, recorded in the *Documenti* XLIV 460, and passing into the MB XVI 224-225.

³⁵ H.I. MARROU, *De la connaissance historique*, Paris, éd. du Seuil 1954, p. 101.

told by Giovanni Bonetti, as follows, in one of his exercise books. «Eight days ago» – he is referring to February 1862 – «two men from his locality, A. Savio and the sub-deacon Cagliero, told me this story of Don Bosco. Don Bosco had one day gone to Castelnuovo and needed a shave [...]. Noticing this [that there was a woman assistant] he at once got up, took his hat and saluted her with the words: "I shall never allow any woman to take me by the nose"».³⁶

It makes a good yarn; the sort told by country folk. But one needs to think twice about the scene and what he actually said before deciding whether Don Bosco's words, which we shall never know in exact detail, revealed his «savage chastity»... The author of the *Memorie* gives it as though it were a report soon after the event: «Don Angelo Savio and Mons. Cagliero told us that on one occasion, having arrived in Castelnuovo and needing a shave, he looked round for a barber's shop...». By so doing he oversimplified the understanding of his sources and, therefore, of their meaning.

The consequences of such an omission can be serious. Don Lemoyne (and later Don Ceria) ought to have taken pains to get to the bottom of the two accounts of Don Bosco's «bilocation», the first in 1878, the second in 1886. While he was certainly in Turin on both these dates, the *Memorie* make him appear in the flesh at Saint-Rambert d'Albon, in France, on 14 September, 1878, giving credence to a letter dated 13 April, 1891, from a lady called Adèle Clément; and, accepting what the Salesian priest John Branda said, he is made to appear at Sarrià, near Barcelona, on the night of 5 February, 1886.³⁷ The first of these testimonies is mere supposition without any serious foundation. The second testifies merely to a «vision» rather than to a genuine «bilocation». Any judge, in carrying out his task, knows that a testimony has to be carefully weighed. Unfortunately the hagiographer in a prescientific age, with his attachment to tradition, was slow to do so, especially when there was a risk of dimming the brightness of his saint. Those hagiographers who are familiar with the human sciences and with scientific method, are obliged to make a critical evaluation of their sources and, in general, to «interpret» any documents. If they do otherwise, there is a danger, with the wave of a wand, of building wonderful «spiritual castles» in the air.

This is not the place to excuse this defective procedure by the authors of the *Memorie*, beginning with Don Lemoyne. To plead that they were «men of their time» would not be an adequate defense. In the field of hagiography – leaving aside the great strides made in historical writing during the modern

³⁶ G. BONETTI, *Annali* II, p. 36 et ss. The passage reappears in the MB V 161-162.

³⁷ The happening at Saint-Rambert, as in *Documenti* XLIII 335-336, and confirmed by a letter of a daughter of Madame Clément, Lyon, 18 April 1932, in MB XIV 680-684. For the happening at Sarrià, cf. *Documenti* XXXI 86-89, and the MB XVIII 35-39.

era – the Bollandists had been at work for more than 250 years when Don Lemoyne published the first volume of the *Memorie Biografiche*. They had steadily refined their methods in dealing with sources relating to the lives of saints. In the 17th and 18th centuries the historians of Port-Royal had helped to transform hagiography into true history.

When Le Nain de Tillemont wrote of the saints in his *Memoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles*,³⁸ he did so as a real historian. When similar *Mémoires* were produced with a view to writing the lives of various personalities, they were of good quality (curiously enough Don Lemoyne used the same title: *Mémoires*). It is undeniable that the pious biographies of the 18th and still more of the 19th centuries were of very poor scientific quality, preoccupied as they were with giving edification rather than with declaring and explaining the truth. Oddly enough, the return to more rigorous techniques coincided with the appearance of our *Memorie* after Louis Duchesne (1843-1922) and Hippolyte Delehaye (1859-1941) fiercely attacked «pious legends» in the «Bulletin critique» and in their own specialist publications.

The splendid introductory study of the Bollandist Charles de Smedt, *Principes de la critique historique*, had been published in 1883, and others were doing similar work. In 1895 the authors of a collection of lives, *Les Saints*, published at Paris under the direction of Henry Joly, expressed their conviction that the booklets ought to be rigorously historical. Many of them were excellent little books. Delehaye himself contributed with his *Saint Jean Berchmans*.³⁹ This scientific method did not, so far as one can discover, reach the Italian clergy; it is fair to point out that it is still not universally applied even amongst French-speaking writers; and the anti-modernists of the early 20th century would have viewed it as quite unorthodox.

Don Lemoyne was trained in Genoa around 1860. Now, according to an article by Pietro Scoppola in 1971, «if one is to believe reports and comments made about the 19th century by experts, often foreign experts, the level of ecclesiastical culture was extremely mediocre. More recent research has provided examples of this overall impression [...]. The level of studies, whose serious deficiencies Rosmini had denounced in the *Cinque piaghe della Santa Chiesa*, remained exceedingly poor, in spite of some improvements. By and large, professors were not selected for their competence, and, despite a few exceptions, empirical studies were neglected...».⁴⁰

³⁸ Cf. LE NAIN DE TILLEMONT, *Mémoires pour servir...*, Paris, Robustel 1693-1712.

³⁹ Cf. H. DELEHAYE, *Saint Jean Berchmans*, Paris, Lecoffre 1921, p. 172. See also the paragraph on the *évolution de la biographie spirituelle à l'époque moderne*, in the article by P. POURRAT, *Biographies spirituelles*, in: *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. I, Paris 1937, columns 1715-1719. Also R. AIGRAIN, *L'hagiographie. Ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire*, Paris, Bloud et Gay 1953, *passim*.

⁴⁰ P. SCOPPOLA, *Italie. Période contemporaine*, in: *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, VII, 2^{ème} partie, Paris 1971, columns 2296-2297.

Empirical sciences were neglected and our Salesian historians shared in the prescientific spirit of their fellow-countrymen who, in research of any period, did not bother to check and evaluate data. It is essential to get beyond that stage and to enter the age of science.⁴¹ Progress has been made not only in physics and biology but also in history. The historian, too, in his own way has to experiment. He has a storehouse of ideas: he must question them, frame hypotheses, check them, verify them and adjust them on the evidence of sources. Ideas are his tools, the sources provide him with new forms of awareness which enable him to question mankind's past.⁴²

Don Lemoyne believed he had laid the foundations for a truly «rational» work. «When I penned the pages they came not from the imagination but from the heart but guided by reason, after long study, consultation and comparison of sources. The narrative, the conversation, the things that I have judged worth recording, are the faithful and literal account of what witnesses affirmed».⁴³

Unfortunately, he confused rational perfection with the accumulation of bulk or «substance», in other words the heaping up of documentary accounts of past events without any systematic analysis. His work ran the risk of becoming an enormous monument to «prescientific» hagiography.

8. Treatment of the documentation

For this first generation of Salesian writers the important thing was to collect documents and present them in legible form. Our three biographers did this, or so it seemed, given that they produced 19 volumes which were diligently read by those for whom they were intended. They were translated into three languages, English, Spanish and Dutch. Their bulk is an indication of the abundance of documents assembled in this kind of encyclopaedia of early Salesian history...

Here I feel that we need to pay homage to Don Lemoyne the editor of private letters and circulars, the collector of articles from periodicals and of booklets for his *Documenti per scrivere...* He rendered a priceless service to historians of Don Bosco. In their turn his successors, Don Amadei and Don Ceria, published a large quantity of original material in volumes X to XIX. The appendices to Don Ceria's volumes, containing documents in small print and becoming more abundant as the saint's life unfolded, have already been of great assistance to researchers. The *Documenti* that are carefully repro-

⁴¹ This comment, like some others here, is taken from G. BACHELARD, *La formation de l'esprit scientifique*, quoted in note 24.

⁴² See the paragraph on «l'usage du concept» in the excellent booklet, already quoted, of H.I. MARROU, *De la connaissance historique* 146-168.

⁴³ MB I, p. IX.

duced (I can testify to that care) by Don Lemoyne, and those in the appendices of Don Amadei and Don Ceria, give historians of Don Bosco the material they seek. For example, anyone studying the progress of Don Bosco's long journey through France in the spring of 1883 is provided with first-hand information from the 70 items (letters, chronicles, reports of meetings, memoirs, newspaper articles) which are published in an appendix to volume XVI of the *Memorie Biografiche*.

But much else remains in which good material is inextricably entangled with inferior and more questionable information as a consequence of editorial method which we now, perhaps, begin to glimpse. Our authors' idea of what an historical account should be, was, I dare to say, equally prescientific. In their view documents were simply the imprint of history and their specific form was irrelevant: it was only necessary to arrange and present them in coherent fashion. The originality (or unusualness) of the details was what interested the compiler. He considered that what constituted fine historical writing was the number of items that could be arranged and wedged into a narrative in order to enrich it. This is the real «substantialism» of the prescientific spirit.

The lack of attention to the form peculiar to the document, often to the kind of document it was and always as regards its interpretation, reappeared in the composition of the text of the *Memorie*, which grew from the *Documenti*. The reader should know that this work of compilation began, even before the *Documenti*, with Don Lemoyne's (and, I think, Don Berto's) interest in such items as Don Bosco's «dreams». In composing the narrative they thought the main thing was to capture the «reality», as it emerged from the surrounding details. This conviction was erroneous (Gaston Bachelard warns us that obsession with precise numbers is another symptom of the prescientific mind. A truly scientific person modestly accepts the probable and the approximate, especially in history). Consequently a deposition duly attributed to some named individual may be embroidered with parallel information; a talk said to have been given on a particular evening may be modified and added to, complementing the talk with what people recollect of it, and even adding things about events (that sometimes happened in dreams) mentioned in the talk. These modifications can assume proportions that would amaze anyone not forewarned. On the other hand, if the testimony is relatively unimportant it may be turned into an account in the first person and then, at the opportune moment, Don Bosco is presented as saying or writing it to colour and enliven a chapter or paragraph. Once all the details of an event are established, it matters very little in what kind of literary form one places them (quotations from a text, personal depositions, the words of a witness, formal discourses). For our biographer it is only a matter of their aesthetic arrangement.

To please the reader, he will readily make his hero speak in the first person. This can be done by reproducing texts by Don Bosco or reports of his talks hastily taken down by his disciples. Nor was Don Lemoyne content with «quotations» that were on the whole authentic, though not always so. In the midst of his straightforward writing and stories, out of the blue he would add direct and indirect interventions of Don Bosco himself taken from a different period of his life, or from other people. He thus succeeded, quite unintentionally, in making Don Bosco assume a style of speaking or writing that was quite alien to this simple, direct man.

In the *Memorie Biografiche* the account of Don Bosco's first Mass on Sunday, 6 June 1841, in the church of St. Francis of Assisi in Turin, is introduced in unequivocal style: «In his well known manuscript Don Bosco wrote the following...».⁴⁴ Don Lemoyne was referring to the *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, where we in fact read: «... and I celebrated my first Mass in the church of St. Francis of Assisi, where Don Cafasso was dean. I was eagerly awaited in my home place, where there had not been a first Mass for many years. But I preferred to celebrate it quietly in Turin, and I can say that it was the most beautiful day of my life. In the "Memento" during that memorable Mass I was careful to pray for all my professors and benefactors, both spiritual and temporal, and especially for Don Calosso, whom I have always remembered as a great and outstanding benefactor. Monday...» (and his diary continues).⁴⁵

This brief and calm account of one of the greatest days in the life of his saint seemed scanty and inadequate to Don Lemoyne. The 9 lines from the *Memorie dell'Oratorio* become 20 lines, all within quotation marks, in the *Memorie Biografiche*.⁴⁶ For 8 lines he follows the manuscript quoted above, though with slight variations (like the addition of the Christian name of Don Cafasso), then digresses suddenly, before returning to the original text after 6 lines. Finally, he takes it up again at the end of his account. Lemoyne's resulting reconstruction reads as follows: «... As for my first Mass, I celebrated it in the church of St. Francis of Assisi, where Don Giuseppe Cafasso, my great benefactor and director, was dean. I was eagerly awaited in my home place, where there had not been a first Mass for many years. But I preferred to celebrate it quietly in Turin, at the altar of the Guardian Angel, situated on the gospel side of the church. On this day the universal Church was keeping the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, the archdiocese of Turin the feast of the miracle of the Blessed Sacrament and the church of St. Francis of Assisi the feast of Our Lady of Graces, who had been honoured there for centuries; and I can call that day the most wonderful day of my life. In the

⁴⁴ MB I 519.

⁴⁵ MO 115.

⁴⁶ MB I 519.

"Memento" of that memorable Mass I was careful to pray for all my professors and benefactors both spiritual and temporal, especially for the lamented Don Calosso, whom I have always remembered as a great and outstanding benefactor. It is a pious belief that the Lord unfailingly grants any grace for which a new priest prays in his first Mass; I prayed fervently for the gift of eloquence, to enable me to do good to souls. It seems to me that the Lord heard my humble prayer».

The autobiographical fragment has been amplified in two stages, first in the *Documenti* and then in the *Memorie* of 1898. The first additions were made in the *Documenti* II, that is in 1885. The text from the *Memorie dell'Oratorio*: «... I celebrated my first Mass...» etc. is reproduced as far as the phrase about Don Calosso, in other words the whole account of the ordination day. The insertion about the gift of eloquence (which is of interest for the understanding of Don Bosco's psychology) then occurs.⁴⁷ This addition, surely derived from a written testimony, which one day may be discovered, deformed the story as originally told by Don Bosco.

The alteration worsened after Don Bosco's death. Amongst the first lines of the *Documenti* that were touched up, Don Lemoyne inserted some phrases borrowed from a signed memoir that we now call the *Spiritual Testament* of Don Bosco. To Don Lemoyne we owe the opening modification: «As for my first Mass, I celebrated it... etc.», as well as the insertion of Don Cafasso's Christian name, «Giuseppe», and «my great benefactor and director».⁴⁸ Don Ascanio Savio's deposition for the process of canonization furnished the insertion «to enable me to do good to souls», placed after his prayer for the gift of eloquence.⁴⁹

Finally, on the different offices for 6 June 1841, he wrote into Don Bosco's text information he got from a liturgist in 1891. Lorenzo Romano wrote to Lemoyne in the name of Don Luigi Dadesso, the rector of the church of St. Francis of Assisi, on 11 December, 1891: «As you requested I have searched the registers of this church and have discovered that the very reverend Don Giovanni Bosco celebrated his first Mass on 6 June, 1841, at the altar of the Guardian Angel, which is situated on the gospel side of the church». Lorenzo Romano continued, apparently volunteering the information out of his head: «and on that day the universal Church was celebrating the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, the archdiocese of Turin the feast of the

⁴⁷ *Documenti* II 6.

⁴⁸ See the edition by F. MORTO, *Memorie dal 1841* 20; also MB I 519.

⁴⁹ This addition is certainly derived from Ascanio Savio, *ad 13um*, who also provided the continuation of the text, not in quotes, found in MB I 519/30ff. There one reads: «I can only testify that, as he told me, on the occasion of his ordination amongst the graces he had asked for was the gift of the word to be able to do good to souls. In my judgement he got this grace abundantly...» (Ascanio Savio, *ad 13um*: Processo ordinario della Curia di Torino, p. 4552).

miracle of Most Holy Sacrament, and the church of St. Francis of Assisi the feast of Our Lady of Graces, who had been honoured in the said church for centuries...».⁵⁰

This is the source of the following learned lines in our *Memorie*: «... at the altar of the Guardian Angels, situated on the gospel side of the church. On that day the universal Church was keeping the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, the archdiocese of Turin the feast of the miracle of the Blessed Sacrament and the church of St. Francis of Assisi the feast of Our Lady of Graces, who had been honoured there for centuries». Their presence in something written by Don Bosco is surprising, but they are explained by Don Lemoyne's historical method. Being indifferent to the nature or «form» of the documents he used – letters, explicit testimonies, indirect testimonies, writings, quoted words, written discourses, discourses heard and reported, etc., – he would use them in the form that suited his exposition. The details of the substance – and the substance was all he bothered about – could be inserted in a comment, a discourse or a quotation between inverted commas. The feigned quotation from the «well known manuscript» of Don Bosco about the first Mass is an amalgam of heterogeneous fragments (admittedly of good quality) which is informative about the event but is not true to the hero, to his style, his recollections and his well known sentiments. There is no need to dream up some lost manuscript of Don Bosco about this period, as do almost all readers of the *Memorie Biografiche*. This passage, unwisely attributed to Don Bosco's own hand, was put together by Don Lemoyne.⁵¹

He adopted this procedure dozens, perhaps hundreds of times in the *Memorie Biografiche*. Quotations, even those from Don Bosco, are rarely faithful and never certain. When there were parallel accounts of an event, the document from which he «quoted» was touched up and given interpolations.

One has to emphasise this aspect of the work of Lemoyne, and, by implication, of the other two authors of the *Memorie*, who relied upon his already amended *Documenti*. Their quotations are more or less unusable. A commentator has to study what picture, possibly false, they are creating of any given personage. The story of the *Sacra di S. Michele*, which Don Bosco told his boys during a walk, and recounted with a precision that could scarcely be expected even from someone endowed with a good memory, is another proved distortion, because one can very easily identify the original text.

⁵⁰ Letter of Lorenzo Romano to G.B. Lemoyne, Turin, 11 December 1891, reported in the *Documenti*, XLIII 9.

⁵¹ The last biografer to be taken in by that kind of apocryphal quotation was, so far as I know, the prudent Secondo Caselle, in his excellent book, *Giovanni Bosco, Chieri, 1831-1841...* Torino, Acclaim 1988, p. 208, where the passage attributed to Don Bosco is reproduced in full between inverted commas.

In volume IV of the *Memorie*, in the account of a walk in 1850, these words are put on Don Bosco's lips as he talks to his boys: «And so», he said to them «this sanctuary of St. Michael of the Gorge, commonly called *La Sacra di S. Michele* because it was consecrated to the Archangel, is one of the most famous abbeys of the Benedictines in Piedmont. Beginning as a simple hermitage round about 990, built in honour of St. Michael by a holy man called Giovanni da Ravenna who had retired there, it was changed after a few years into a majestic Gothic church with a big convent attached where the monks could live, by Ugone di Montboisier, called the "Scucito", a gentleman of Alvernia...».

The story continues for a good page. Ugone di Montboisier entrusted the construction work to «Atverto» or «Avverto», abbot of Lusathe in France. When the work was finished, the latter brought Benedictine monks to the new monastery. They elected Atverto Abbot. Very soon in the abbey there were up to 300 monks. In 1383, as the primitive discipline grew lax, it became a dependent abbey under the protection of the dukes of Savoy, right down to the French invasion in the early 19th century. The narrator concludes his learned exposition with the history of the Valle di Susa and of the victory that Charlemagne gained over the king of the Lombards...⁵² All this was within quotation marks.

Many readers and commentators, even experienced ones, have gone into ecstasies about Don Bosco's erudition! They have been led astray by our biographer, who felt he could here employ his dramatic techniques. About 1880, an issue of the «Salesian Bulletin» had recounted the *Storia dell'Oratorio*, and we know this to have been a fruitful source for the *Memorie*. The text quoted above appears in chapter XXVIII of that *Storia*, published in the April issue of the «Bulletin» for 1881. There, in an article entitled *Visita alla Sacra di San Michele*, one may read at the foot of page 15 a long historical note, probably lifted from an encyclopaedia by the author, Giovanni Bonetti. One has only to quote the first lines to recognise the process which produced the account attributed to Don Bosco in the *Memorie Biografiche*. «The Sanctuary of San Michele of the Gorge, commonly called *La Sacra di San Michele*, because it is consecrated in honour of the Archangel, is one of the most famous abbeys of the Benedictines in Piedmont. Beginning as a simple hermitage round about 990, built in honour of St. Michael by a holy man called Giovanni da Ravenna, who had retired there...», etc. Even the anecdote about Charlemagne's stratagem in the Valle di Susa in order to defeat the Lombards, is given there.⁵³ As for Don Bosco, only one thing is certain: during the walk he chatted freely with the boys. Don Lemoyne used the episode to tell his readers about the Sacra of San Michele, a monument

⁵² MB IV 118-119.

⁵³ *Storia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, in BS (April 1881) 15, no. 1.

that had not, in fact, the remotest connection with the history of the Salesians.

We know that he had no scruple about describing as a «testament» of Don Bosco to his cooperators a composition found, as Don Lemoyne says, amongst the saint's papers immediately after his death and inscribed: «To be opened after my death». He included a printed version in his *Documenti*, presenting it with the words: «This is the precious document». ⁵⁴ Unfortunately, Don Ceria, in his excessive fidelity to these methods, imitated his confrère in the *Memorie Biografiche*, ⁵⁵ though he was able later to acknowledge the truth about this supposedly autographed letter, which was in actual fact a version by Giovanni Bonetti. ⁵⁶

Don Lemoyne joined fragments together, juxtapositioned them and interpolated one with the other in the interest of what he thought was the truth; in certain cases – a few, but most regrettable – the result was a false characterisation. On those occasions his compilation gave his material a totally new shape on account of the way he had treated his sources, to which he at times referred. The passage on the first Mass in the church of St. Francis of Assisi is a case in point. One of the most misleading examples is the one relating to the totally imaginary audience granted to Don Bosco by Pius IX on 12 February, 1870. Each of the pieces put together is «substantially» authentic, but the overall picture that results is wholly fictitious. It was an audience that never existed. ⁵⁷

Nevertheless Don Lemoyne's desire to be a faithful narrator could reproduce Don Bosco's very words and reflect the founder's spirit. His laborious undertaking involved the organisation of reminiscences, choice of approach, little insertions in a symbolic whole within which our narrator, like every narrator, was limited.

9. Don Lemoyne's «charismatic» explanation of Don Bosco

Don Lemoyne had only one general intention, to describe, with the aid of a crowd of witnesses, the life of an extraordinary man. But, encouraged by his admiration for and his knowledge of the saint, he sought to grapple with that life in all its subtle and varied aspects, and to penetrate to the inner truth and workings of a soul that was so intimate with God. Lemoyne's descriptions thus became explanations. From words and actions he went back to their origins. In this way he would make the story of Don Bosco, like

⁵⁴ *Documenti* XL 324-332.

⁵⁵ MB XVIII 621-623, with the introduction: «Don Bosco diceva...».

⁵⁶ Cf. E IV 393 note.

⁵⁷ Cf. F. DESRAMAUT, *Le récit de l'audience pontificale du 12 février 1870 dans les Memorie Biografiche de Don Bosco*, in RSS 6 (1987) 81-104.

every true history, «intelligible». Accordingly, he had recourse to conceptual models that need much probing if one is to examine our three Salesian hagiographers with true scientific rigor. The chief of those writers superimposed on Don Bosco an idealised image of his own conceiving.

Armed with this preconception, of which he was probably unaware and which he certainly saw no need to examine critically, so objective did he believe it to be, Don Lemoyne set about explaining the life of his hero. I imagine a long chapter could be written about this idealised image created by Don Lemoyne. It is of interest to any historian who would understand the Salesian mentality, which, through the *Memorie* has been deeply impregnated with it to a degree that would be hard to measure.

I touch here on only one main aspect that could be described as all-embracing. Don Lemoyne saw Don Bosco as a charismatic, in the Weberian sense of the word. From his first meeting with him (the Lerma experience) he attributed to him supernatural powers, and this attitude later influenced his interpretation of the saint. Xavier Thévenot wrote recently, speaking of Don Bosco: «Charismatic power is seen as extraordinary and, when the possessor is a believer, as supernatural, a gift of God. The person who possesses such power affirms that he feels entrusted with a mission which becomes a kind of inner compulsion and a sign of God's will. [...] From the psychoanalytic point of view one can say that a charismatic leader is experienced as someone endowed with special knowledge and power. As his disciples over-idealise him, he appears to them to be perfect and capable of succeeding where all others fail. They end by attributing to him a reputation for infallibility and omnipotence, and often, an extraordinary control over his own aggressive and sexual desires: to admit that the leader is, in fact, subject to desires of this kind would be a painful denial of that infantile need for omnipotence which is at the root of idealization».⁵⁸

When he looked back over his own life, Don Bosco certainly felt that God and Mary had guided, enlightened and sustained him in his laborious undertakings, which were finally crowned with success. If, as psychologists say, «superdetermination» is the «characteristic behaviour which is determined by many concurrent forms of motivation», then he could see himself as being «superdetermined» by heaven. For example, he affirmed that he had seen Our Lady in a dream at the beginning of his priestly life, indicating to him the piece of land at Valdocco (at which the basilica would be erected) and saying to him: «*Hic domus mea...*». But he was careful to go no further. He never pretended to have been given from the start a kind of divine programme, with a vocation that was so clear that he merely had to un-

⁵⁸ X. THEVENOT, *Don Bosco éducateur et le système préventif* (Colloque universitaire de Lyon), 1988. See the Italian translation of this talk in «Orientamenti pedagogici» 25 (1988) 704-705.

derstand and then follow it throughout his life. That kind of «superdetermined» interpretation (another characteristic, according to Gaston Bachelard, of the «prescientific» instinct) which ignored «secondary causes», had to play down and minimise any natural explanation, thus robbing the saint's life of real historical meaning. And that is precisely what we find happening with Don Lemoyne in the *Memorie*. He had none of the scepticism of historians who refuse a priori to discover any meaning in their story. He interpreted things too readily on the basis of a first experience never seriously examined, and so fell into the opposite and likewise grave mistake we call «fantasy». He ended by imposing his own «fantastic» views, with methods that are highly questionable.

To transfer one's own general ideas and attribute them to another – Don Bosco – is especially harmful. The interpretative comments of the biographer thus assume unwarranted authority. The recent article in «*Ricerche Storiche Salesiane*» on Don Lemoyne the historian reproduces extracts from his preface to a small book published by him in 1889 on the role of Mary in Don Bosco's life. Here is one of them: «Everything is summed up in a simple motto. Whenever Don Bosco set about a new enterprise he used to talk as if he saw clearly all its more or less successful stages [...] like the captain of a ship [...] who knows the whole voyage ahead even before he leaves port. Oh, how good the Madonna is!».⁵⁹

Four years earlier Don Lemoyne had expressed almost the same idea in *Documenti* III referring to 1847, when, according to him, Don Bosco had gone from Turin to Stresa to visit Antonio Rosmini, whose follower he intended to become. In the middle of a sentence we read: «On his part he was inclined to give total obedience to whoever gave him commands; he would have preferred to advance his project under someone else's authority, in other words, guided by obedience to a superior. But the Virgin Mary had indicated in a vision the field of his labours. He had a plan set out and preordained, from which he could not and would not free himself. He was totally answerable for its success. He saw clearly the line to follow, the means to be adopted if the undertaking was to succeed: therefore he could not put it at risk by entrusting it to the judgment and wishes of others. In that year he merely wanted to see if he could carry out his work in some existing institute, but he quickly realised that he could not...».⁶⁰

In the *Memorie Biografiche* he increased the persuasive power of these considerations by placing them, quite gratuitously, in the mouth of Don Bosco. This attribution could seem to be partly well-founded. A passage of at

⁵⁹ G.B. LEMOYNE, *La Madonna di Don Bosco ossia Relazione di alcune grazie concesse da Maria Ausiliatrice ai suoi devoti*. Torino, Tip. Sal. 1889, p. 17 et ss. Quoted by P. BRAIDO and R. ARENAL LLATA, *Don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne* 113.

⁶⁰ *Documenti* III 151.

least one of the manuscript versions of *Cronichetta*, attributed to Don Barberis, covering the early days of January 1876, was almost entirely in the first person and put as coming from the lips of Don Bosco. The saint himself does not mention the intervention of Our Lady. It was his plan. Only after the explanations of Don Bosco, the editor of *Cronichetta* had written in his own words: «It seems to me to be genuine and clear that he would have liked to say thus: – The Virgin Mary had indicated to me in a vision the field in which I was to work. She also showed the means I was to adopt in order to succeed in this undertaking». In the *Memorie* Don Lemoyne followed or imitated this chronicler. He recast the text of *Documenti* in the first person and began: «The Virgin Mary – Don Bosco later told us – had indicated to me in a vision the field in which I was to work. I thus had a complete, pre-ordained plan...».⁶¹ The human «plan» of the founder became a kind of revelation.

It would be interesting to seek out from the volumes of the *Memorie* the phrases in which Don Lemoyne, without any qualification, attributed to God and to Mary the plans which their disciple John Bosco carried out in his life. Such a shortcut on the youthful vocation of Don Bosco mislead his biographers quite a bit. One reads with reference to the eve of his priestly ordination in 1841: «At this point we cannot fail to examine the logical progression of his remarkable dreams. At the age of 9 John Bosco learned of the grandiose mission that would be entrusted to him; at 16 he was promised the means needed to feed innumerable boys; at 19 he is given a firm command that makes him realise that he is not free to refuse the mission entrusted to him; at 21 it becomes clear which class of boys is to be the object of his spiritual care; at 22 he has the great city of Turin pointed out as the place where he must begin his apostolic labours and make his first foundations. Nor did these mysterious revelations stop there, as we shall see; they continued at intervals until God's work was complete. Are we to call these things the products of mere fantasy?».⁶² Yes, dear Don Lemoyne: the product of fantasy is precisely what they are! But your fantasy, not Don Bosco's. It may be you had forgotten this fact when you were coming to your conclusion about the «logical progression of his remarkable dreams» during his youth. But these accounts of «dreams» stated by you to have occurred when Don Bosco was 16, 19 and 21 featured, in the early pages of your volume, as probable or certain versions of the one dream he had at 9, and were then scattered over John Bosco's entire youth, and all on the basis of extremely feeble chronological information.⁶³

⁶¹ MB III 247. The passage of the *Cronichetta* (ASC 110, Barberis) still unpublished, III (pages not numbered) was reproduced in FdB 796 E8-10.

⁶² MB I 426.

⁶³ I have explained at length this duplication of the dream he had at the age of 9 in *Les Memorie I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne* 250-256.

These more or less gratuitous interpretations of Don Bosco's life as «superdetermined» enable the artist to paint a remarkable portrait, but the true understanding of Don Bosco's real story is correspondingly destroyed. The continuity that should exist between the medium and the message is broken. A man who feels himself to be predestined and who knows his whole journey in advance, can go forward without any insecurity; his searchings, doubts, struggles, mistakes and discoveries, the temporary setbacks before his final triumph, all these are like a shadow play. His life becomes a mere shadow while the real action is going on elsewhere. Is that kind of earthly life possible? Don Bosco himself never said anything about his destiny (or about its «superdetermination»!) in the words that Don Lemoyne so imprudently attributed to him. Don Bosco certainly called on the grace of God and the intercession of Mary; but the sort of superdetermination that Don Lemoyne reads into his life does great damage to our understanding of him. That initial preconception leads to a false picture. What has become of the real Don Bosco who was constantly searching and constantly adapting?

That idealization of the saint by Don Lemoyne, in his effort to «understand» Don Bosco's life, involved the emphasising of other aspects, especially certain virtues: the humility, gentleness and kindness that were part of the leader's charisma. These qualities so influenced the biographer, consciously or otherwise that they coloured his presentation of his hero's words and phrases. Any aggression was systematically played down; for example, Lemoyne never admitted that Don Bosco was ever angry (he systematically replaced the word «anger» [*rabbia*] with «scorn» [*sdegno*]); nor did he admit that he had ever shown harshness to a pupil, even in his dreams. This was one of the grave shortcomings of a work that was, in many respects, gigantic.

10. Don Ceria's method

The methods of construction and composition of Don Amadei, in vol. X of the *Memorie*, are similar to those of Don Lemoyne. The general feel and style of his account is more or less the same. Then, with vol. XI, the tone changes. The series of 9 volumes by Don Ceria is all of a piece. These volumes are interesting and well written. But those qualities are not enough to satisfy the demands of today. It would be good to know whether, with Don Ceria, the method of writing about Don Bosco moved to some extent from the «prescientific» stage of Don Lemoyne to one more in tune with our current legitimate expectations of something more scientific.

In order to complete in record time the history of the life of Don Bosco (from 1875 to 1888), issuing a volume each year from the massive documentation that had to be consulted, Don Ceria followed faithfully the *Documenti*, which were set out year by year in about 30 registers. The material for the

year 1875 was in register XV. He did some complementary research, but very little. If he did modify the *Documenti*, which were already a reasonably well articulated history of Don Bosco, he never contested or even checked the particular constructs of his predecessor. He never sought to identify the sources that were available to the latter. One example amongst many may suffice.

In volume XVIII he copied out, complete with dialogue and comments, but with no references, the story of a strange visit to Don Bosco by a French lawyer on 3 February 1886. The lawyer asked him some rather indiscreet questions about the Bourbons.⁶⁴ The account concludes thus: «It was suspected by some that this was an agent of the French police sent to investigate Don Bosco's political ideas» – especially anything relating to the possibility of restoring the French Monarchy –. «None of the saint's replies could have aroused suspicion or given ground for any accusations. It had always been his policy not to get mixed up in politics». The words of this conclusion are lifted almost verbatim from the *Documenti*.

However, unlike Don Lemoyne, he did not insist upon the inclusion of the tiniest details in his story. He soon took the liberty of summarising passages or significant sentences. This was an editorial liberty that Don Lemoyne had never taken. Even so, the principles of interpretation that governed our two biographers were very similar. Don Ceria, like Don Lemoyne, held that every testimony is a reflection of life and, taken just as it is, allows its reconstruction. So he did not set himself to analyse that life as it unfolded in the world, in the spirit and, where necessary, in what the witness wrote. The witness could have left later accounts, and the final one (as in the case of Viglietti) was not necessarily the best. Nevertheless, his past familiarity with Greco-Roman literature inclined Don Ceria, I believe, to distrust at times what were presented as directly reported conversations and accounts, and which he consequently changed into a straight story. When we compare the *Memorie* with their sources in the *Documenti*, we see that Don Ceria attached less importance than the more frequent redactors of the *Documenti* (Don Berto as well as Don Lemoyne) to the predictions and prophecies of Don Bosco. He introduced the original documents into his account without any modifications. Hence any inaccuracies, some of them most regrettable, were involuntary on his part.⁶⁵ More modern in his approach than Don Lemoyne, who approximated to Jacopo da Voragine, he did not habitually indulge in the miraculous. We can see that there was an advance from one generation to another.

⁶⁴ The source is *Documenti* XXXI 44 et s., used in MB XVIII 28-29.

⁶⁵ Amongst other things Don Ceria has Don Bosco saying at the general chapter of 1883 that the «Bolleettino» ought to be diffused «like a public periodical» (cf. MB XVI 412), whilst Marengo's minutes, which Don Ceria had before him, stated exactly the opposite: «it was not to be promoted as a periodical» (ACS 046, CG 1883, p. 6).

In spite of this, although Don Ceria was more prudent and wary in his reading of the source documents, he cannot wholly escape the qualification of «prescientific» that we apply to his predecessor.

The actual text of the *Memorie* demonstrates Don Ceria's literary skill. In his volumes, the material for the various years of Don Bosco's life is well organised and not just strung out haphazardly for the sake of chronology. Each chapter has its own title that corresponds to its content. The style is limpid and the story unfolds smoothly. All that is needed in order to appreciate the literary quality is to interrupt the reading of one of his volumes and go back to read 50 pages of Don Amadei. It is like wandering from a neat and orderly garden into the undergrowth of a forest in which one is soon lost. To any reader of the entire *Memorie* the years 1871 to 1874 of Don Bosco's life, as told by Don Amadei, remain enigmatic. By contrast Don Ceria's account of the years 1875-1888 picks out the characteristic events of each year: the departure of the first missionaries, the foundations (successful or otherwise) in France; Don Bosco's attempts to sort out at Rome the problems with Mons. Gastaldi; the affair of the *Concordia* imposed by Leo XIII; the great journey to Paris in 1883; the one to Spain in 1886; and the final painful months of Don Bosco's life. All these clear and carefully presented narratives are the work of Don Ceria.

Notwithstanding all this, some of Don Ceria's decisions as a redactor of the *Memorie* are questionable. He softened down some harsh episodes, sweetened certain proposals and, occasionally, suppressed the less pleasing aspects of certain characters. It was mostly a question of diplomacy! Don Ceria himself told me on 12 August 1952, that a canon of the Turin curia refused him an *imprimatur* in 1930 for volume XI of the *Memorie* (the first one by Don Ceria), because the book showed Archbishop Gastaldi in an unfavourable light. Don Ceria had asked the advice of P. Rosa S.J. of the «Civiltà Cattolica» and the latter had advised him to publish the work *pro manuscripto*, a juridical device which enabled him to dispense with any *visto* from the Turin curia. In that way he was able to publish the book. I am certain, however, that this taught Don Ceria a lesson, warning him that he had to consider the reactions of certain ecclesiastics. This explains his silence on certain matters and various omissions.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ On the same day he told me of a similar incident that was of more importance. In 1938, an official "revisor" – a cardinal, if I remember aright – had told Don Ceria that he must suppress a complete chapter on Monsignor Gastaldi in the first draft of his splendid book *San Giovanni Bosco nella vita e nelle opere*. He did so with great reluctance. And so, at the end of chapter XXXIV about the church of St. John the Evangelist, one finds these words (p. 283): «This was one of many painful episodes that formed part of a long story of suffering which, on account of its duration and consequences, was the most severe that the saint had to endure». The text concludes simply: «But more weighty considerations suggest that the account of these matters should be deferred to a more opportune time and place».

Don Ceria's version of happenings is always temperate: he doesn't single out Don Bosco's sighs and sobs and those of the entire body of the faithful in the church of Mary Help of Christians, when the missionaries left for Quito.⁶⁷ He softens Don Bosco's proposals to the «superior chapter» about the boarders at Valdocco.⁶⁸ The words: «many Salesians have no Salesian spirit at all», which Don Bosco uttered in the «superior chapter» on 5 November 1883, were modified by Don Ceria in the *Memorie* to «certain» Salesians have no Salesian spirit...⁶⁹ The resulting portrait, consequently, lacks some of the vigour that one would favour nowadays.

To probe Don Ceria's understanding of Don Bosco's life would demand further elaboration based on examples and careful comparative assessments. It is hardly possible to attempt that here, but I think I can offer this comment: in his routine interpretation of Don Bosco's life, despite his habitual dependence upon the accounts and comments given in the documents, Don Ceria avoided the excesses and *a priori* systematization of Don Lemoyne;⁷⁰ but he made little effort to break free from the pious and portentous explanations favoured by Don Lemoyne. He usually followed his sources and gave (though more briefly) the same explanation of Don Bosco as they had done.

11. Final comments

By way of conclusion to this brief series of observations concerning the working method of the three authors of the *Memorie Biografiche*, it may be appropriate, I think, to consider two categories of people whose intentions are very different. There are those who seek spiritual nourishment in uninterrupted reading of the *Memorie Biografiche* which is for them a book of devotion; then there are those who peruse these great volumes searching for material for study (historical, psychological and theological). For the latter the volumes are a handy collection of documents concerning Don Bosco.

The first group find in the *Memorie* the «story» of Don Bosco, a story that is neither more nor less «true» than every story in the common sense of the word, picturesque, edifying, colourful (except for vol. X), rich in facts

⁶⁷ Cf. *Documenti* XXXVI 77, and MB XVIII 430.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Documenti* XXX 521-523, and MB XVII 581.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Documenti* XXX 571, and MB XVII 586.

⁷⁰ He omits, for example, the unlikely comparison made in the *Documenti* between the epistolary exchanges of Don Bosco with the Parisian Countess of Cessac and the relationship of Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal. See *Documenti* XLIV 461: «...They were just like those of St. Francis de Sales to Chantal...», and MB XVI 231, where one reads: «... it seems that she received from him many letters in the form of spiritual direction. That is what has been reported, but up to now we don't know of one such letter». He is, of course, speaking of all this being «reported» in the *Documenti*, which he had in front of him as he wrote.

and phrases, calculated to enrich the spirit. The benefits of such a cursive reading of the *Memorie* that will soon have stood the test of a century, seem in many ways obvious. And yet such writing is not a waste of time, even allowing there may be some who have a legitimate preference for writings on Don Bosco that are "truer" and more solidly based.

My words, however, are directed chiefly towards those readers of the second category who devote themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, to the study of Don Bosco. For them the advice is different, beginning with a most authoritative comment that Don Ceria made to me, as to many others, at the end of his life. «I would advise these people», these are more or less his precise words, «who intend to produce a thesis on Don Bosco to choose some other subject – perhaps later, when Don Bosco's letters will have been published...».

He recognised that his *Memorie*, which many others have seen as the one definitive source for serious study of Don Bosco, could not provide the basis for rigorous study of the saint. With the exception of the *Documenti* published as such by Don Ceria and Don Amadei at the end of their volumes, he was absolutely right.

If the great volumes of Don Lemoyne and of his two successors, whose work relied on his, were constructed according to the «prescientific» criteria of composition and interpretation that I have tried to make clear, there can be no guarantee of the authenticity of the elements which people particularly like to glean from them, namely the saint's statements and the observations of the immediate witnesses of his life (such as the house chroniclers). Moreover, certain texts are modified, apocryphal accounts abound and stories become legends with the lumping together of widely differing accounts.

If research is to be done, let it be done rather on the actual sources of the history of Don Bosco. The *Opere edite*, on their own, provided Jacques Schepens with material for his voluminous but interesting thesis entitled *Pénitence et Eucharistie dans la méthode éducative et pastorale de Don Bosco. Étude à partir de ses écrits imprimés*.⁷¹ Researchers should have recourse to Don Bosco's own writings and publications, letters to him and from him, house chronicles and minutes, whether published or otherwise, as did professor Luciano Pazzaglia in his fine study on *Apprendistato e istruzione degli artigiani a Valdocco (1846-1886)*.⁷²

In this way scholars will avoid the misfortunes experienced by others who made use of the *Memorie Biografiche*. I shall give only one example since as a member of the Salesian General Chapter of 1984 which produced the official text of the constitutions I feel I am at least materially at fault. In the

⁷¹ Roma, Università Pontificia Salesiana, 1986, vol. 2, pp. 498 and 279.

⁷² Cf. F. TRANELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987, pp. 13-80.

first article of the revised constitutions of that year the Salesians wrongly used a formula attributed to Don Bosco in the *Memorie Biografiche*, giving the precise reference in a footnote: «The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher capable of total self-giving; “I have promised God that I should give myself to my last breath for my poor boys!”» (MB XVIII 258). In actual fact, the chronicle written by Carlo Viglietti, which is the source of this saying as quoted in the *Memorie* quoted Don Bosco as saying that he had promised God that «to his very last breath» he would devote his life not for his «poor boys», as in the transcribed text, but for his «poor orphans», in other words for the abandoned youngsters whose father he had become. There is all the difference in the world between «living for boys» and «living for abandoned boys»!