

DON BOSCO'S LETTERS
AS A SOURCE FOR KNOWLEDGE
AND STUDY ON DON BOSCO.
Project for a critical edition

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0. Introduction

Amongst the particularly valuable writings of Don Bosco which exist only in inadequate or incomplete editions one must certainly number his letters. Accordingly, the Salesian Historical Institute has, from its very inception, considered that a complete critical edition of the saint's letters is a matter of top priority.¹ Four years ago I was asked to oversee this task, which was planned as something more than a celebratory act, even if it did happen to coincide with the revival of interest in this Piedmontese saint and educator caused by the centenary of his death.

The present studies congress offers me the opportunity to consider *in nuce* and *extra operam* the value of such a collection of letters, the archival and linguistic methods adopted in researching the project and the hermeneutic principles which will direct the recovery of the *corpus* of letters.

Let me say at once that although, according to general belief, Italians are not fond of reading collections of letters,² this collection of Don Bosco is even less likely to overcome their usual lack of interest for at least four reasons which I will briefly outline:

¹ Cf. *Proposte per un piano di lavoro unitario e comune*, in RSS 1 (1982) 95.

² In other countries editions of the letters of painters, musicians, politicians and other famous people are increasingly popular with the general reader. Studies concerning the nature and function of the epistolary art are enjoying a boom. For some time talks on the subject have been organised in France and research centres set up to document modern and contemporary letters. It is only recently that in Italy the number and competence of those interested in this field of work has markedly increased. Congresses on this topic were held in Bressanone in 1983, at Urbino in 1984, and more recently in Genoa. In 1986 the publishing house of Rosellina Archinto was founded for the sole purpose of publishing letters. Good articles in the popular press and in magazines increasingly emphasise the significance that this kind of writing can have for the study of history and linguistics.

1. The projected new edition in no way promises to satisfy a questionable taste for the sensational, or to uncover a secret life hitherto unknown. Don Bosco's letters are extremely frank and sincere but he tends not to reveal his deep interior life, his dramas of conscience, his most intimate emotions. Nor is there any point in looking for skeletons in his cupboard.

2. Similar disappointment would be experienced by anyone who, just because these numerous letters were written by a saintly priest, an outstanding educator, an inspired founder, an incredibly active social worker, expected therefore to be treated to an exhaustive discussion of spiritual, ascetical or pedagogical matters. No, only here and there can one gather bright pearls of wisdom which are the fruit of his holy life, his pastoral daring, his shrewdness as an educator, and which are scattered amongst references to the numberless concerns of his daily life.

3. Anyone hoping to make sensational discoveries of a political, social or religious nature will be equally disappointed. It is true that Don Bosco, living and working as he did in that troubled period we call the «risorgimento» may refer to events or personalities of great importance, or count on political, social or religious affairs of the day; but politics in the strict sense or the analysis of civil and religious society were of interest to him only in so far as they affected his daily life and his responsibilities as a father, an educator, an entrepreneur, a superior, a friend and the administrator of often quite large sums of money.

4. Similar disappointment would await anyone who hoped to find in Don Bosco's letters a work of art, a model of the epistolary art worthy to be classed as "literature". Don Bosco did not write letters as an exercise in rhetoric or in order to achieve literary fame, even though that was an affection dear to his century. He did not revise his letters with a view to improving style or vocabulary. He may be writing to the Pope or to a minister, to humbler folk or to a boy in school; his style is substantially the same, characterised by simplicity, frankness, homeliness, shrewdness. There may be waverings in his writing and spelling, the introduction of Piedmontese or French expressions, irregularities in grammar and syntax, and yet these things did not call for correction since they were destined only for the eyes of the person to whom they were sent.³

³ I do not believe that one is committing a profanation or revealing epistolary secrets when one makes public something Don Bosco wrote in private intimacy. Letters written more than a century ago have ceased to be confidential and have entered into history. Don Bosco himself never excluded the possibility of their eventual publication, even if he expressed some reservations. He wrote in his *spiritual testament*: «If some of my Italian letters should ever be printed, attention should be paid to their meaning and doctrine, because the majority were written hastily and, therefore, with the danger of many inaccuracies. The French letters can be burnt; but if there were a desire to print any of them, I recommend that they should be read and corrected by an expert in the French language, lest the words express a sense other

Don Bosco's correspondence is about business and day-to-day administration, penned with extreme speed with the sole intention of passing on some useful message to the recipient. His phrases are concise and without nuances of emphasis; they are direct, brief, at times lapidary, opening and closing with the kind of stereotyped patterns that are used by a person who has a lot to attend to and who is subject to constant interruption.⁴ If only he had had access to the telephone, he could have saved hundreds of hours of work, and we researchers, instead of his wealth of letters, would have had in our hands a most disappointing haul. He wrote because he was compelled to by the inescapable demands of his work as a priest and educator, by the harsh necessity of providing bread for thousands of boys in his houses and by the obligation he felt to help, advise and support all those who opened their hearts to him. He sent good wishes, news, congratulations, thanks, letters accepting or declining invitations, explanations, farewells, requests, advice, rebukes, recommendations, and words of comfort. There were letters of a few lines or of several pages, business letters or circulars. One can safely say that every category of letter is represented.

After these introductory remarks it seems fair to ask what is the point in taking on such a burdensome task as the critical editing of these letters.

1. The main reason for this collection of letters and for a critical edition

Why, then, should we take on such a task? Because when a man has played a considerable role in the history of his country, when his influence during his own lifetime has reached several nations and, within a century, reached the whole world, when the many facets of his personality continue

than that intended and so bring into contempt or derision the religion they were meant to promote» (Bosco, *Scritti pedagogici* 336-337).

⁴ The haste with which Don Bosco wrote his letters is often mentioned in the *Memorie Biografiche*: «His ability to write with great speed was also remarkable. Over a number of years the cleric Durando often accompanied D. Bosco to the "Convitto" of St. Francis to help him send off his letters. This is what happened. Once Don Bosco had written a letter he gave it to Durando, who folded it, sealed the envelope and wrote the address. Before the cleric had completed this operation, another letter was already finished. The cleric speeded up his task, but before he had completed the address a third letter was added, and so on for several hours. When it was finally time to return to the Oratory Don Bosco, after a prayer of thanks to God, would exclaim with a smile, "That's the way to speed up business!" And certainly the number of letters that he wrote would seem incredible, but there are many witnesses of this wonder» (MB V 609-610). In the last years of his life Don Bosco admitted to Don Barberis: «Today, like most days, at a quarter past two after lunch, I was already working at my desk. I never moved until eight o'clock; and yet I had to leave work unfinished. My desk is still covered with letters awaiting a reply. And yet, I don't work slowly. My fingers get through a great deal of work! I have noticed that through practice and through the pressure of work, I have learned to write so fast that I doubt if it is possible to go faster» (MB XII 38-39).

to provoke study and reflection (as this congress demonstrates), then it is important that the instruments we use in our analysis be as complete and as professional as possible.

What could provide us with a surer or more complete understanding of Don Bosco, of his moral stance and the vicissitudes of his life, than the thousands of letters he wrote over a span of more than 40 years? This is all the more true because we are dealing with someone who saw letter-writing as one of his main duties.⁵

1.1. *An invaluable service to any biographer or historian*

Every historian and biographer quickly learns, as his work progresses, that the story of any life calls for documentary sources, prime amongst which are letters. Of course no-one can expect letters to tell the whole story, since their material is fragmentary and demands further investigation and integration. They need to be evaluated with the same critical penetration as is used in connection with any other source: for example one must not overlook the blemishes that are normal in correspondence, the person and subjective nature of the information, the danger of being deceived by the apparent authority of an account in the first person, the need for placing any letter in a context, and so on.⁶ All this, however, does not take away the fact that any scrupulously careful investigation of the history of a person and of his work calls for detailed analysis of his letters, which, at times, may be the only source for certain critically important facts and opinions.

⁵ Even if they are to be accepted with reservations, here are some testimonies from his biographers and from Don Bosco himself: «The letters he sent and received are beyond numbering. Working day and night he wrote and despatched up to 250 a day. The multiplicity and variety of topics that he was called upon to deal with is staggering [...]. He received letters from all over the world and his own letters we are convinced, were sent in greater or lesser quantity to almost every city in Europe» (MB IV 540-541). In a letter of 4 July, 1881, Don Bosco wrote thus to the «cavaliere» Carlo Fava: «It is a pleasure for me to write to you, as I now prepare to answer the 500 letters by which I am surrounded». In his old age he sadly complained to his Salesians: «On certain days [...] I was writing more than one hundred letters» (MB XVII 459). See also the preceding note.

⁶ «La correspondance est un matériau d'un maniement délicat, un témoignage trompeur malgré les apparences et qui reste nécessairement lacunaire, par défaut de conservation des envois et des réponses, par volonté expresse ou négligence de l'auteur, à cause de diverses formes de censure, par le fait que rarissimes sont les lettres "sincères", etc. Les correspondances étant presque toujours tout sauf ce qu'on voudrait qu'elles fussent: un matériau fiable, à valeur documentaire, lisible au premier degré...»: Preface of G. Ulysse to *La correspondance*: 2 Actes du Colloque International, Aix-en-Provence, Université de Provence 1985, p. VI. It is undoubtedly true that situations and reactions and emotions that Don Bosco experienced in his personal daily life stand out more clearly in his letters than in any of his other writings, thanks to the relaxing of the careful attention to form and content that he maintained in texts destined for publication.

Don Bosco's letters are obviously a case in point. Provided they are considered with care, and with all the techniques of modern research, they provide, once decoded, a sure source for the clear understanding of events and circumstances and of Don Bosco's decisions. They also frequently provide a full expression of his convictions and of his spirit. Letters written *currenti calamo*, in a moment of quiet calm or in the heat of some bitter experience, with the enthusiasm born of contentment or with the awareness of impending danger, such letters almost allow us to invade his privacy, to enter his room and see him seated at his desk, to photograph him as he sits immersed in problems, difficulties, hopes and plans for the future. Set out, as I intend, in strict chronological order, yet retaining the apparent disorder of business letters, good wishes, spiritual advice or pleas for material help, they will reveal his life and also provide a commentary on the man by the man who created them. When we consider that there will be, on average, a letter for every three or four days⁷ throughout the period of his life when he was most intensely active as an educator, it becomes clear how heavily biographers and historians can and will have to draw upon such a collection of letters.

I use the future tense, «can and will have to draw», deliberately, because in spite of the huge amount written on Don Bosco in the hundred years since his death, historians still suffer from a lack of secure, exhaustive and definitive historical data. Don Bosco's multifarious activities throughout his long life and the complex events in which he was a protagonist or participant still need to be checked and verified – no easy task!

The very facts recorded in the voluminous *Memorie* require systematic verification, and the promising but limited research so far carried out in that direction merely whets the appetite for more.⁸ Once we know for sure «how things happened», to use the famous formula of Ranke, then it will be possible to proceed with a critical history: it will be possible to ask serious questions about historiographic methods, to correct valuations, judgements

⁷ From the ten years between 1830 and 1840 there remains only a rough draft of a letter scribbled in an exercise book during the school year 1835 to 1836. From the first five years of the 1840's few letters remain up to the end of 1845. The last signed text goes back to December 1887. It is hard to estimate approximately how many letters Don Bosco wrote during his life. In 1933 Don Ceria wrote: «The published letters of Don Bosco are far fewer than those which were lost or lie somewhere, unknown» (MB XIV 556). However, if one wants to hazard a figure, I think one might say more than 20 thousand. Of these several hundred would be in French and a very few in Spanish, English and German (these letters having only his signature). Of many no trace remains; concerning others there exist unexceptionable documents which guarantee their having existed, even though the contents have not been preserved and the whereabouts of the original is unknown.

⁸ The first study from this point of view was the article by J. KLEIN and E. VALENTINI, *Una rettificazione cronologica delle Memorie di San Giovanni Bosco*, in «Salesianum» 17 (1955) 581-610. Other similar essays have recently appeared in various numbers of «Ricerche Storiche Salesiane». See also the report to this Congress by Don F. Desramaut.

and prejudices based on what seemed obvious causes and effects or on shaky, if not false, *a priori* documentary foundations.⁹

The wealth of details, moreover, lights up a whole series of very delicate questions and provides a source for critical judgements that, even today, has not been fully utilised.

The principal interest in Don Bosco's letters therefore, is that it provides clear documentation that can serve as the basis for the future reconstruction of past events, thus giving us a more precise and more rounded understanding of the saint's complex personality. And all this is done through the living voice of the main protagonist, recorded in all its immediacy and vitality.

I do not believe that the massive documentary evidence of the letters will give rise to a view of Don Bosco substantially different from that which is already familiar to experienced scholars, but there is no doubt that the figure which emerges is surprisingly different from the one presented in some books, even recent ones. The Don Bosco of the dreams, of the miracles and marvels, the «numinous» Don Bosco, is one thing; quite different is the everyday Don Bosco that emerges from his correspondence, a being that reaches us on a very earthly wavelength, with all the realism of someone subject to problems, contradictions and uncertainties. What shines out from the Don Bosco of the letters is the charm of everyday life, divested of the aura of mystery which, however involuntarily, would create around him a quite misleading atmosphere of remoteness and ambiguity.

1.2. *A tool to be used by many researchers*

Another far from negligible element of the correspondence in question is that the extraordinarily varied social contacts of Don Bosco present us with a vivid cross section of the social, political, cultural, economic and church life in the second half of the last century which was shaken by so many conflicting movements. A letter is a reflection of society, revealing the writer and his correspondents within a particular situation, faced with precise personal and shared circumstances. A letter can accordingly give us, to some extent, the flavour of a period, as well as details from which we can construct a better profile of the personalities involved.

I have no wish to act here as an apologist for the projected edition of the letters against possible critics, but confirmation of what I have just said is provided by the extraordinary variety of Don Bosco's correspondents: civil authorities, like heads of state or government (Victor Emmanuel II, Cavour,

⁹ An example of the careful «revision» of previous interpretations that needed correcting is furnished by Giuseppe Tuninetti in his contribution to this Congress on the long and painful conflict between Don Bosco and Mons. Lorenzo Gastaldi.

Rattazzi, Ricasoli, Minghetti, Lanza, the Emperor of Austria...), ecclesiastics, such as popes, cardinals, bishops, religious superiors (Pius IX, Leo XIII, Cardinal Antonelli, Rosmini...), writers and men of culture (Tommaso, Balbo, Pellico, Vallauri, the priests producing the «Civiltà Cattolica»...), aristocrats and the nobility of Piedmont, Florence, Rome, Nice, Paris, Marseilles, Barcelona, South America, very humble benefactors, diocesan clergy, men and women religious, adults and young people of low social extraction, etc. It is true that much of the correspondence to these people was about money; nevertheless it also helps us to reconstruct their personalities and environment as well as their relationships with Don Bosco, and the moral and spiritual situations in which they found themselves.

We can thus assure any would-be sceptic that Don Bosco's letters furnish us with a great deal of extra information which we can derive from no other source. The projected critical edition will have implications not only for historians and biographers but also for students of psychology and psychoanalysis, of economics and sociology, of theology and spirituality, of literary linguistics, local history, politics, genealogy and education.¹⁰ The letters used individually or collectively, in analytical detail or within a broader spectrum, can thus assist in the integration of various disciplines and so widen our understanding of cultural and civil affairs. Thanks to new techniques and methods of analysis, they could even provide useful and at times indispensable assistance as we attempt the qualitative leap in our understanding of Don Bosco which so many people, and not just our present company, desire.

Looked at from such a point of view, even the literary blemishes, mistakes in spelling and syntax, phrases crossed out but still decipherable, the use of certain idiomatic expressions, far from being an annoyance, help us to observe the linguistic characteristics of the writer, his powers of self-expression in his own conversational style of writing, the literary conventions of his time, environment and personality.

2. Fundamental problems of method

The problems of method which I have to face are those experienced by any editor of a wide range of letters. Great studies have been made in the science and art of editing letters, but so far no absolutely fixed principles

¹⁰ There has been debate in various places on the significance of what is involved in publishing letters. The most recent examples of these different approaches are collected in various «quaderni di retorica e poetica», edited by G. FOLENA: see *La lettera familiare*, Padova, Liviana Editrice 1985. For France, see the above-quoted international conference at Aix-en-Provence: *La correspondance...* For different ways of reading Don Bosco's writings, including his letters, useful suggestions are offered by R. FARINA, *Leggere Don Bosco oggi. Note e suggestioni metodologiche*, in: *La Formazione permanente interpella gli istituti religiosi*, edited by P. BROCARDO, Torino, LDC 1976, pp. 349-404.

have been established, may never be, given the unique nature of every collection of letters.¹¹ Three problems have to be faced: the *collecting of the letters*, their *transcription*, and the *production of critical and historical comment*.

However, before stating briefly how each of these problems has been tackled in preparing the present edition, I believe it would be well to answer the question: for whom is the publication of this collection of letters being made? The identification of one's audience carries with it implications for the method of work to be followed. If the work is for specialists, then minute detailed information is demanded, even though the general reader would find it boring and pedantic. If that kind of detail is absent, the more informed reader may judge it merely as a work of popularization which is of no interest to him.

I have already partly answered the above question: the editorial task which I have assumed is that of providing scholars and students of various disciplines with a useful and exhaustive source for their work. It may be asked: who needs all the notes and explanations that accompany the text of a letter? Who needs that kind of textual scrupulosity which often holds up the flow of what is read? The reply is, «No-one». But the text is not edited for any one person but for a multitude of people, including those with no specialised knowledge, those who know little or nothing about Don Bosco and the origins of the Salesian congregation, and for whom the social, political, cultural and religious background of the 19th century Italy are more or less a closed book.

In other words, I shall try to prepare a critical edition that is scholarly and scientific but not inaccessible to the general reader who wants a good read, without any pretention to be a scholarly bookworm. It is always difficult to resist the temptation to say everything; but what is too much for one reader is too little for another.

In drawing up descriptive and explanatory notes my general criterion has been based not on abstract norms but on the experience of other people

¹¹ Every country has experienced this problem. In Italy not much has been written on the question, but the following may profitably be consulted: M. MARTI, *L'epistolario come "genere" e un problema editoriale*, in: *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*. Convegno di studi di Filologia Italiana, Bologna 1961, pp. 203-208; one of the most useful introductions to a collection of letters is that of E. Garin introducing A. LABRIOLA's *Epistolario 1861-1890*, edited by D. Dugini and R. Martinelli, Roma, Editori Riuniti 1983. In French, PUBLICATIONS DE LA SOCIÉTÉ D'HISTOIRE LITTÉRAIRE DE LA FRANCE, *Les éditions de correspondances*. Colloque, 20 Avril 1968, Paris, Librairie Armand Colin 1969; *Ecrire Publier Lire les correspondances*, Actes du colloque international «Les correspondances». Publications de l'Université de Nantes 1983. In English: E. BOWERS, *Some principles for scholarly editions of nineteenth-century American authors*, in «Studies in Bibliography» (1964) 223-228; G.T. TANSSELLE, *Some principles for editorial apparatus*, in «Studies in Bibliography» (1972) 41-88. With reference to Germany: S. SCHEIBE, *Some notes on Letter editions: with special reference to German writers*, in «Studies in Bibliography» (1986) 36-148. Note, too, that at Toronto, in Canada, there have been for years symposia on *editing texts* and the acts of these meetings are regularly published.

with a view to making Don Bosco's text stand out clearly, also typographically speaking, and add explanations only in so far as they are needed for the understanding of the text.

Let us now return to the editorial principles of which I was speaking.

2.1. *Finding the original texts*

Needless to say, the present editor operates within less than ideal conditions, since he does not have at hand all the originals of Don Bosco's letters, or all the replies to them. Nor does he have all the documents needed for the full comprehension of those letters and replies. Though we have no right to be critical of our predecessors who risked publishing Don Bosco's letters, the fact remains that both the compilers of the *Memorie Biografiche* and Don Ceria in the *Epistolario*¹² sought to ascertain the internal content of the letters (which was not always linguistically correct) without posing the question of the container, namely its filing in the archives which alone guarantees its authenticity and value.

My guiding rule, therefore, which I hope is beyond question, has been to study personally all the first-hand documents or photocopies of the same. So far our search has resulted in an abundant harvest of more than 3,000 letters,¹³ including some of only a few lines. To these must be added several hundred printed texts for which we have no original manuscript but which are authenticated by trustworthy witnesses.

This is not the place to go into the history of how these manuscripts and printed texts were preserved and handed down. Suffice it to say that they have involved exhaustive inventories, endless pursuit of material, searches sometimes successful sometimes fruitless, at times resulting from information about collections of letters, at other times as the result of private initia-

¹² The 19 volumes of the *Memorie Biografiche* reproduce, though not always in chronological order, about 2,360 letters. These were used by G. LUZI (cf. G. BOSCO, *Lettere scelte*, Paravia 1945), and by Don Eugenio CERIA for his *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco*, which carries no less than 2,845 texts. Unfortunately, although Don Ceria was allowed by their owners to consult many of the original letters, he never indicated where they were to be found. Consequently the editor of this critical edition will at times have to rely on the text printed by Don Ceria without being able to check its accuracy. Sometimes only an extract from a letter is available (because it has been only partially recorded): at other times there is merely an indication that a letter exists. Don Ceria's collection of letters has also provided the dozens of letters published in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti Spirituali*, voll. 2 edited by J. Aubry, Roma, Città Nuova 1976, recently republished in a single volume.

¹³ In the conviction that the letters for volume one (covering 1835-1864) would be hard to find abroad – since these countries are numerous and not limited to Europe – the first general search has been limited to Italy. Virtually every widely read paper or review, once approached, readily agreed to publish notices for our search. The celebrations for the centenary of Don Bosco's death have also provided more publicity.

tives; hundreds of archives, public, private, civil and ecclesiastical libraries were explored and, thanks to the means of mass communication, even individual families were contacted. Word of the research was announced in specialist historical reviews and to all Salesian communities throughout the world.¹⁴

I shall resist the temptation to tell of delightful and disconcerting episodes that I have witnessed: the acts of generosity and of greed, the destruction of original letters due to negligence of heirs or to excess of devotion, the tact and diplomacy needed in order to obtain even a copy of manuscript from certain collectors who were so much more possessive than official curators. Nor should I linger over another significant feature of the research, the financial cost, increased because many texts had moved from one country to another and because the centenary had made collectors push up their prices. One example may suffice: the famous London house of auctioneers, Sotheby's, years ago, catalogued and sold two original letters of Don Bosco that didn't seem particularly important. Despite all our efforts we have so far failed to trace them.

Incomplete as it is, our collection has revealed huge chronological gaps, the destruction or loss of most important first-hand manuscripts,¹⁵ and the serious damage that can be done to epistolary material and to any projected critical edition by archives that are poorly indexed. The biggest collection of originals are at hand in the central Salesian archives, in the secret Vatican archives, in the city council historical archives at Turin, in the central State archives in Rome and in certain diocesan archives, especially in what was once the kingdom of Savoy.¹⁶

¹⁴ There are actually more than a thousand originals or photocopies of unpublished letters in the central Salesian archives. Some of these are of considerable historical significance.

¹⁵ Take, for example, the almost total absence of any correspondence with Mons. Luigi Fransoni, under whose jurisdiction Don Bosco worked for almost 20 years. Up to now it has also been impossible to consult the archives of the house of Savoy which ought to contain items of considerable interest. Letters to the central state authorities have also been scattered for a variety of reasons, not least being the successive transferrals of the capital from Turin to Florence and then to Rome.

¹⁶ In the search for Don Bosco's letters to the Pope and the Roman curia, one will have to consult, in the secret Vatican archives alone, hundreds of papers scattered throughout a series of collections: the *Secretariate of State*; *Epistulae Latinae*; *Epistulae ad Principes*; *Congregation of Bishops and Regulars*; *Spogli Cardinali*; the *Turin Nunciature*; *Briefs*, etc. To these must be added the archives of Roman Congregations not contained in the secret archives: *Congregation of Bishops and Regulars*; *Propaganda Fide*; the *Index*, etc. Given the vast scale and the organization of the secret Vatican archives, the complexity of an exhaustive search thus becomes apparent. I have made a start in that direction, and a few new acquisitions have already appeared in the review of the Salesian Historical Institute and in *L'azione mediatrice di Don Bosco nella questione delle sedi vescovili vacanti in Italia dal 1858 alla morte di Pio IX (1878)*, in the volume: *Don Bosco nella Chiesa*, ed. by P. BRAIDO, pp. 251-328. The central Salesian archives are currently being reorganised, so there is a chance that new letters or references may be discovered. A good deal of detailed research has already been carried out in

The documents obtained are far from equally polished and finished: they vary from an abundance of rough drafts to the original hand written letters, from signed manuscript transcripts to copies that are variously authenticated, from simple transcripts to printed versions that are, unfortunately, not free of errors and on which, in the absence of the originals, it is necessary to depend.

2.2. *The editing of the text*

The aim of any critical edition is to provide the reader with a text that is authentic and accurate, so that it can be used by anyone who is interested. If it were not so, even the most exhaustive and detailed editorial apparatus would be worthless.

How should one present Don Bosco's letters? Exactly as they are, without any arbitrary interference or modification by the editor; in other words, following the same linguistic criteria as one would use in publishing the writings of any other author. Any correction required for the sake of historical accuracy would be accompanied by a footnote. The handwriting of this Piedmontese educator, as is well known, poses something of a problem, but for anyone familiar with it, it involves little more than the choice between a capital or a small letter, the deciphering of what looks like a certain letter or syllable when it ought to be another, or the interpretation of a word that is scarcely visible. Another obvious task is the identification of the many corrections made by the writer or by others in the first drafts and even, at times, in the actual letters.

Our edition will accordingly reproduce the text of the letters with all the verbal accuracy possible, even if it has to be «corrected» by making minimal though essential changes in punctuation and spelling, by using cursive type for the titles of books and for expressions in other languages, by amending any obvious *lapsus calami* (which will always be pointed out) or by a different arrangement of paragraphs.

2.3. *Editorial Notes*

The lay-out of the notes will be as follows:

1. The text of the letter will be preceded by *descriptive notes*. These will provide information about the manuscript (or printed text) in question: from

the city council archives of Turin, so there is less chance of any surprising finds in that quarter: cf. the introduction to the most recent study (in three parts), edited by G. BRACCO, *Torino e Don Bosco*, Torino, Archivio Storico della città di Torino 1989.

which archives it comes, its dimensions, the colour of the paper and of the ink, its state of preservation, particular symbols, postmarks, the category of the letter, any previous edition in the *Memorie Biografiche* and in the *Epistolario* produced by Don Ceria together with a brief summary of the letter's contents. Of course it is always possible that Don Bosco never actually despatched any given letter.

2. The apparatus to indicate *variant readings* will be placed immediately after the text of the letter and the address of its recipient. If it is a question of the draft of a letter, this will be compared with the original in either the author's own or another person's hand and the critical apparatus will give any variations.

In honesty it must be said that most of these will deal not with any interesting development of ideas or anything substantially new, but rather with the addition or suppression of things of limited interest or with formal corrections of no literary significance. It is to be hoped that such a string of variants may not become a monument to the pedantic obsessions of the editor; rather may it be the means for analysing the language and for more clearly understanding the personality of Don Bosco.

3. Finally there will be *historical notes* which, given the nature of the letters, will be divided into the following categories:

– Biographical material, tracing the numerous correspondents and the people referred to, many of whom are unknown not only in national but also in regional or local records;

– Archive references relating to the replies to individual letters or to other documents referred to in the letters. It is useful to note that an outsider can easily overlook certain allusions or modes of expression which the members of Don Bosco's spiritual family would pick up in virtue of their great familiarity with such internal "family" matters;

– Local history material concerning actual events, their previous history and their consequences.

Once the texts have been collated the main problem is how to make precise and appropriate comments on them. As I have hinted, there is a real danger that the text of the letters which is the whole *raison d'être* of the edition, could be crushed under a mass of notes. My purpose, firmly subordinated to that of the writer, must be to provide systematically all indispensable clarifications, and nothing more. Of course, opinions differ as to what is indispensable. The historical and explanatory notes will be used, at the most, to identify the recipients of letters and the people and places referred to, to justify the dating of letters, to explain words and phrases not readily intelligible to the general reader, to provide information about places, circumstances and situations which would be unfamiliar to a non-Italian public and which could, at times, be baffling even for scholars.

Linguistic and aesthetic analysis, interpretations of history, value judgements and more erudite points concerning Don Bosco's life will be left to specialists in those fields. Instead the notes will be used to give, *in extenso*, extracts from and summaries of letters to Don Bosco where these would help us to understand better those *from* Don Bosco. The same will be done with many documents which have some importance, such as memoirs, notes and writings of various kinds, which, although not themselves letters,¹⁷ merit to be printed alongside the letters. When some are unduly long they will be placed in an appendix of documents.

3. Conclusion

I have often asked myself a question concerning the methodology involved: should I wait until all the letters have been collected before beginning to publish them? Quite apart from the fact that no publication of this kind can ever be said to be complete, because the research is always limited, I am inclined to say no to that question, because if I wait until I have all the letters, the work will never be published.

It is difficult to consult the dozens of libraries and archives and quite impossible to trace all the heirs to people who received hundreds of manuscripts; letters of Don Bosco will probably turn up unexpectedly, in the most unlikely places.¹⁸

This ought not to present a real problem, since it will always be possible to add supplements and, by means of the index, locate each letter within the strict chronology established for the letters already in hand when each volume was published. Moreover, the publication will itself be the best way of publicising our desire to obtain further letters.

The editor is acutely aware of his own inadequacy for the task assigned to him and of his temerity in accepting it. The only special qualification that he can boast is that his relative youth should enable him, *Deo volente*, to see the work through to its completion. It is his hope that this edition may contribute towards the better understanding of the historical significance, both in the Church and in society, of the personality and work of the man we call Don Bosco.

¹⁷ By «letter» we mean any communication written by one person to another, indicating the date, the place sent from and the destination, with a formal opening and conclusion and bearing the sender's signature.

¹⁸ This is confirmed by the fact that letters have reached us from places where one would not expect to find letters of Don Bosco: Madagascar, Canada, cities in the U.S.A., Guatemala, Czechoslovakia, etc. The recipients did not necessarily live in those places; the original manuscripts were sometimes carried there by missionaries into whose possession the letters had come.