

THE SITUATION REGARDING HISTORICAL WRITING BY SDB IN GREAT BRITAIN

*Bernard Grogan**

125 years ago it was in this month of November in the final days of the life of our father Don Bosco that the first three Salesians arrived in England to found the first community in Battersea, London. There were two priests: an Irishman and an Englishman and an Italian lay-brother.

It was not the start of Salesian history there since for quite a number of years, as one can read in the *Memorie Biografiche* and in the *Annali della Società Salesiana* – and I quote: “Don Bosco, che guardava all’Inghilterra con l’occhio di chi sospira di vedere l’Isola dei Santi rientrare nell’ovile di Pietro aspettava solo che la Provvidenza gliene offrisse l’occasione propizia”¹.

I would also suggest that perhaps we could recall in this regard the famous dream of Dominic Savio and the Pope with the torch, the light of the faith shining in the darkness... (cf Giovanni BOSCO, *The Life of Saint Dominic Savio*. With introduction and notes by Paul Aronica. Paterson N.J., Salesiana Publishers 1955).

In fact, on this subject I wrote a short note in the magazine *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* two years ago on the occasion of the visit of Pope Benedict to England and the beatification of Cardinal Newman. But since it was written and published in Italy, in Rome, even though in English, it seems to me the note² does not form part of the subject of our meeting in these days here in Benediktbeuern.

Then, in 1892 five years after the founding of the first Salesian community in England, – and therefore 120 years ago – the first issue of the *Bollettino Salesiano* in English was published and printed – but at the Valdocco Oratory in Turin. Only much later, many years later would the *Salesian Bulletin* be published and printed in England. In fact for some years I was the Editor of the *English Salesian Bulletin*.

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¹ Eugenio CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana*. Vol. I. Torino, SEI 1941, pp. 618-621; MB XVIII 447-456; BS XI (dicembre 1887) 148-149.

² Bernard GROGAN, *Dominic Savio and England: another hypothesis*, in RSS 55 (2010) 139-144.

That same year 1892 there were already some novices in London, and the following year in the month of October 1893 they made their first Salesian perpetual profession into the hands of Don Rua – who in those days was in London with other Superiors and with Bishop Cagliero on the occasion of the consecration of the new Battersea parish church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is also possible to read about these events in the *Annali della Società Salesiana* (Vol II, pp. 297-300) and in the *Bollettino Salesiano* both the Italian and the English versions of that period (cf *Bollettino Salesiano* XVII [novembre 1893] 211-212; BS XVII [dicembre 1893] 226-234; *Salesian Bulletin* 13-14 [November & December 1893] 150-161).

But it is also possible to find not only news items but an historical study in the writings of our confrere and member of this Association Fr William John Dickson. Unfortunately he has been unable to attend this Seminar because of other new commitments that he has.

However his two books are:

“*The Dynamics of Growth, the foundation and development of the Salesians in England*”³ – in fact the basis of this volume was the text of his doctorate at the University of Durham in 1988.

The second volume “*Michael Rua. Letters to the Confreres of the English Province*” has the names of two authors, the late Fr Martin McPake and Fr William John Dickson⁴.

Fr Dickson has also written other historical articles. “*The origins of the Salesian work in London, a centenary lecture*”⁵. “*Refounding or renewal. A case study*”⁶. In addition he wrote a contribution “*War, racism and immobility: the social impact of the early Salesian work in Cape Town*”, to Francesco MOTTO (ed.), “*L’Opera salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Significatività e portata sociale. Vol II. Esperienze particolari in Europa, Africa, Asia*”⁷.

But these works too were published in Italy, and therefore, according to the criteria proposed, it seems to me, are not really material for this Seminar. In fact in the letter announcing it written on 30 November 2011 we read:

³ William John DICKSON, *The Dynamics of Growth, the foundation and development of the Salesians in England*. (= ISS – Studi, 8). Roma, LAS 1991.

⁴ Martin MCPAKE - William John DICKSON, *Michael Rua Letters to the confreres of the English Province*. (= ISS – Fonti, Serie seconda, 11). Roma, LAS 2009.

⁵ William John DICKSON, *The origins of the Salesian work in London. A Centenary Lecture*, in RSS 13 (1988) 237-254.

⁶ William John DICKSON, *Refounding or renewal? A historical case study*, in RSS 17 (1990) 457-464.

⁷ William John DICKSON, *War racism and immobility: the social impact of the early Salesian work in Cape Town*, in Francesco MOTTO (ed.), *L’Opera salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Significatività e portata sociale. Vol. II. Esperienze particolari in Europa, Africa, Asia*. (= ISS – Studi, 17). Roma, LAS 2001, pp. 351-376.

“Siamo chiamati a offrire un contributo per valorizzare al meglio quest’occasione e raccogliere materiale utile per tutti”.

“Abbiamo predisposto quattro diverse schede bibliografiche che raccolgano cioè libri ed articoli *stampati in ogni Paese/Nazione... dal 1965 al presente*”.

In fact according to these declared criteria it would appear to me that for us Salesians in England really there just are no examples at all of *storiografia salesiana*.

Perhaps the only example could be a book by Prof. Peter Roebuck published by LAS, Rome 2004, *The Foundation Decade at Shrigley: Seminary, Church & Shrine 1929-39*. (= Piccola Biblioteca dell’ISS, 24).

Certainly there was a small Salesian publishing house – the Salesian Press, Battersea. For several years it published and printed the English *Salesian Bulletin*. Then it was closed.

In fact already in 1908 The Salesian Press, Surrey Lane, Battersea published a translation of the well-known book by Don G. Bonetti “*Cinque lustri di storia dell’Oratorio S. Francesco di Sales*”, with the title: “*History of Don Bosco’s Early Apostolate*”. But this book too, as a translation and with a popular style does not come into the categories mentioned above.

Then in the last fifteen years or so in the Province there has been a new publishing house – Salesian Publications responsible for the *Salesian Bulletin* now with the title “*Don Bosco Today*” and with a long list of books by authors, Salesians and also Daughters of Mary Help of Christians – books that have been greatly appreciated. There are books on Salesian spirituality, retreat books and prayer books and others for adults and children. However, there are no books of *storiografia salesiana*.

And I shall finish on another personal note.

Sixty years ago I made my novitiate in England and in recent years, even before my stay at the Pisana, I began a study of the history of the novitiates, of the houses, of the Directors of Novices and of the novices in these last 120 years. Unfortunately I have not yet managed to complete it. But some years ago in the *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane*⁸ thanks to Fr Francesco Motto, another of my notes was published “*Novices in the History of the GBR Salesian Province*”.

I don’t know whether or not the day will ever arrive when this *magnum opus* of mine will be published as a contribution to “*storiografia salesiana nella regione*”. Who knows? Thank you for your attention.

⁸ Bernard F. GROGAN, *Novices in the history of the GBR Salesian Province*, in RSS 52 (2008) 369-376.