

THE SCUTARINE CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY ALBANIAN LITERATURE

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The expression of nationalist ideals constituted the *élan vital* of Albanian letters in the nineteenth century. It was particularly important in the budding field of Albanian-language journalism. This creative Albanian literature “per se” arose under the aegis of the Catholic Church just as it had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Albanian Catholic Church had its power base in the north at Shkodra and the highlands. It was traditionally Italian-oriented. In the mid-nineteenth century, Catholics in this region also came under the influence of Austria in the *Kultusprotektorat* (religious protectorate), a right Vienna had wrestled from the Sublime Porte in a series of peace treaties with the Sultans beginning in 1616. The *Kultusprotektorat* was reconfirmed after the Austrian-Turkish war of 1683-1699. It authorized Austria to serve as “protectress to the Catholic population in the Balkans,” among whom were the Catholics of northern Albania. With more political pragmatism than altruistic evangelization in mind, Austria began stepping up her activities under the protectorate. This was a means to wield considerable political influence in northern Albania in order to check the Ottoman Empire from within. It also countered any political ambitions of the Orthodox southern Slavs. With Austrian assistance, schools and churches in northern Albania were built or repaired. The Catholic Church intensified its role in the fields of education and culture. Shkodra, known at the time as *Scutari*, soon developed into the literary and cultural centre not only for Albanian Catholics, but for all Albanians.

Religious orders, especially the Benedictines and Dominicans, were active in Albania from the high Middle Ages onwards. However, it was the Franciscans and later the Jesuits who were to have a decisive influence on nineteenth and early twentieth-century Albanian cultural development.

The history of the Franciscan order (*Ordo Fratrum Minorum* - O.F.M.) in Albania dates from 1248. A group of monks was brought to the country by the noted missionary Giovanni da Piano Carpino (1182-1252). One document dating from 1283 lists a number of Franciscan monasteries in Albania. By the fourteenth century, the Franciscans had founded their own Custody in Durrës, the *Custodia Durracensis*. In the mid-nineteenth century, the order became increasingly active in the field of education and cultural affairs. It established a Franciscan School in 1855, which later came to be known as the *Illyricum*. This was the first school in which the Albanian language was taught. A Franciscan Seminary was established in 1861 which provided course instruction in the Albanian language. Later, the Franciscans operated a printing press which produced a number of religious and secular books in the Albanian language as well as periodicals of literary and cultural interest such as *Hylli i Dritës*, 1913-1944 (The Day-Star), and *Zâni i Shna Ndout*, 1913-1944 (The Voice of St Anthony).

Members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) came to Albania in 1841. Among the first three Italian Jesuit missionaries were writers Giuseppe Guagliata and Vincenzo Basile. They travelled from Sicily to set up an Albanian mission. Despite their late arrival, the Jesuits played an inestimable role in developing education and promoting culture in northern Albania. The primary postulates of the Jesuits were the training of seminarians for the priesthood and the propagation of the faith. In order to achieve these objectives, they set up schools, churches and publishing facilities. These activities and the Jesuits’ formidable intellectual talents also contributed substantially to raising the educational and cultural level of their new homeland. In 1859, the Jesuits opened the *Kolegjia Papnore Shqyptare*

(Albanian Pontifical Seminary) in Shkodra and in 1870 set up the *Shtypshkroja e Zojës s'Paperlyeme* (Press of the Immaculate Virgin). Six years later it produced its first book in Albanian, the 'Christian Doctrine' of Ëngjell Radoja. During the next fifty years, the Jesuit press had published a total of 471 works in Albanian, Italian and Latin. Like the Franciscans, the Jesuits also produced several periodicals of note, such as *Elçija i Zemers t'Jezu Krisctit*, 1891-1944 (The Messenger of the Sacred Heart), (after 1914 it was named *Lajmtari i Zemers t'Jezu Krishtit*), a magazine of religious culture; *Përparimi*, 1914-1916 (Progress), a short-lived historical and scholarly journal; and *Leka*, 1929-1944, a monthly cultural review. The Jesuits founded the College of St Francis Xavier (Saverian College) in Shkodra in 1877. It evolved into a major centre of higher education for all of Albania. By stressing instruction in the Albanian and Italian languages, the school produced many of the great Albanian writers and national figures of the early twentieth century.

It was these Catholic-educated Albanians and to some extent the Italian clerics, who had taken up residence in northern Albania, who produced the rudiments of a new Albanian literature in the mid-nineteenth century. This literature of religious inspiration consisted of poetry. Initially, the pieces were imitations and translations of Italian and Latin verse and later, some prose and drama. They indeed set the pace for much of twentieth-century Albanian literature up to the Second World War.

Pjetër Zarishi (1806-1866) was the earliest Catholic poet of the nineteenth century. He came from the village of Blinisht in the Zadrime area. Zarishi studied for the priesthood at the College of the Propaganda Fide in Rome and returned to Albania to work as a village priest. Later, he became abbot of a monastery in the staunchly Catholic Mirdita region. He died in Kallmet in his native Zadrime. He was best known as the author of religious verse. His compositions were a harmonious blend of foreign (Italian, Latin and Turkish) and northern Albanian elements. Zarishi also introduced and popularized a number of metres, such as hendecasyllabics and Sapphic verse. These had been foreign to Albanian poetry. Although some of his verse appeared in the Shkodra periodical *Hylli i dritës*, much of it remained unpublished.

Reverent Ëngjell Radoja, Dom Angelo Radoja (1820-1880) from Shkodra, studied at the College of the Propaganda Fide in Rome. Like so many other Scutarine Catholic writers, he was motivated not only by his religious upbringing but also by nationalist sentiment. Indeed it is rumoured that he was poisoned because of his commitment to the nationalist cause. Radoja authored religious works in the Albanian language. He also translated three important works: *Jesu Criscti n'semer t'mesctarit*, Rome 1862 (Jesus Christ in the Priest's Heart); *Concilli i Dhët Scciypniis baamun n'viet 1703 n'coh t'paps scciyptarit Clementit t'Gnimdhattit*, Rome 1872 (The Albanian Council held in the year 1703 at the time of the Albanian Pope Clement XI), a new Albanian translation of the records of the famous *Kuvendi i Arbënit* (Albanian Council) of 1703; and *Dotrina e kerscten me msime e me spieghime*, Shkodra 1876 (Christian Doctrine with Lessons and Explanations). The latter work constituted the only early catechism originally written in Albanian. All previous Christian Doctrine books, such as those of Pjetër Budi (1618), Bernard de Quintiano (1675), and Giuseppe Guagliata (1845), were translations of the 'little catechism' of St Robert Bellarmine, S.J.

One author of early Albanian prose was the Franciscan monk and missionary, Dario Bucciarelli (1827-1878). Bucciarelli was appointed Bishop of Pulti by Pius IX in 1860 and four years later became Archbishop of Skopje. He is the author of *Udha e sceites cryc' e tiera pun' t'divocme*, Rome 1862 (The way of the Holy Cross and other Devotional Works). The 276-page collection of religious stories was based on the lives of the saints. Bucciarelli also wrote an Albanian grammar in Italian (the manuscript was preserved until recently in Shkodra).

Leonardo De Martino (1830-1923) was the most refined nineteenth-century poet of

the Scutarine Catholic tradition. He was born in the Campanian village of Greci (Alb. *Greçi*) in the province of Avellino. The Franciscan priest was sent to Shkodra for missionary work in 1865. There, with the support of Francesco Crispi, the Italian Minister of Education, De Martino helped open the first Italian school. For most of his years of service in the mountains of northern Albania, he was assigned to the diocese of Zadrina and Lezha. For a time, he served as secretary to Prenk Pasha, prince of Mirdita. De Martino tutored Prenk Bibë Doda (1858-1920) and served as mentor to the young Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940). Fishta took the traditions of northern Albanian verse to far greater heights. De Martino left Albania at the end of the century. He died at the convent of Sarno in Italy in 1923. De Martino surprised many of his contemporaries with his talent for verse. He wrote in the Gheg dialect of northern Albania which he learned during his forty years of missionary work. He also authored Albanian translations of Italian religious literature. Among his translations were *Vaji i hapses* (The Cry of the Woman Prisoner), an Albanian version of *Il lamento della prigionera* by Milanese poet and novelist Tommaso Grossi (1790-1853), which he dedicated to Dora d'Istria in 1868. Another was *Munnimi i Jezu Krishtit*, 1875 (The Passion of Jesus Christ), a translation of the *Passione di Gesù Cristo* by Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782). De Martino's poetry followed the tradition of nineteenth-century Catholic literature established by Zadrina abbot Pjetër Zarishi. It circulated for years on leaflets until his friend, parish priest Ndue Bytyçi of Kosova, persuaded De Martino to publish it in a collection. The resulting volume, entitled *L'Arpa di un italo-albanese*, Venice 1881 (The Harp of an Italo-Albanian), was an impressive 442-page compilation of De Martino's mature and polished verse in Italian and Albanian. His importance as a poet lies not so much in any unusual poetic fantasy or inspiration but in his prosodic finesse. It was Leonardo De Martino who introduced such new metres such as the iambic into Albanian. He also popularized Sapphic verse. His other religious works included a short nativity play entitled *Nata Këshnellavet*, Shkodra 1880 (Christmas Night), the first of its kind in Albanian, and *Arbenorve t'kersectën t'Grisciun Festuër*, Shkodra 1896 (Festive Appeal to Albanian Christians).

Ndue Bytyçi (1847-1917), the 'Nightingale of Kosova,' was a Catholic poet and priest born near Skopje on 8 March 1847. He received his education as one of the first students at the Jesuit *Kolegija Papnore Shqyptare* (Albanian Pontifical Seminary) in Shkodra which he entered at the age of twelve. After his training, he returned to Kosova and Macedonia to teach and minister. Bytyçi authored religious and some secular poetry, which remained unpublished for the most part. He also did translations of Italian religious literature. In 1874, he dedicated a touching sonnet in Peja to his friend Leonardo De Martino. Although he published one patriotic poem entitled *Mymleqeti* (The Fatherland) in 1887, he generally remained apart from the rising tide of romantic nationalism in Albanian verse. His poetry was rich in technique and metrical precision. However, like that of many other Scutarine Catholic writers of the period, it is permeated with Turkisms which makes it difficult for the modern reader. Particularly impressive are his translations of the Psalms of David.

Pashko Babi (1843-1905) was a Scutarine Catholic writer of significance both for Albanian prose and drama. He was born in Shkodra on 6 January 1843. Babi studied at the *Kolegija Papnore Shqyptare* (Albanian Pontifical Seminary) when he was eighteen. Later he served as a parish priest in Sheldia and various villages of northern Albania. The parishioners called him Dom Pashko Sheqeri (Dom Pashko Sugar), not, as has been alleged, due to the sweetness of his disposition, but rather because his father had been a sugar salesman. Pashko Babi died on 13 April 1905. He authored a school book for religious instruction entitled *Vakinat e t'ligs hërsme e t'ligs ree*, Shkodra 1882 (Stories from the Old and New Testament). This was the first school book to be published in Albania. His narrative style and forceful language evinced a popular and lively vein, although his Albanian was once again permeated with Turkish vocabulary. Pashko Babi also wrote one of the first Albanian plays, *I biri i çifutit* (The son of the Jew), which was performed at the Saverian college in February

1882.

Preng Doçi (1846-1917) was known as *Primus Docci*. He was a political and religious figure as well as a poet. Born in Bulgër near Lezha on 25 February 1846, Doçi studied at the *Kolegija Papnore Shqyptare* (Albanian Pontifical Seminary) in Shkodra and at the College of the Propaganda Fide in Rome. He returned to work as a priest in the Catholic Mirdita region in 1871. He was among the leaders of the Mirdita uprising against Turkish rule in 1876-1877. In preparation for this rebellion, Doçi travelled to Cetinje, capital of Montenegro, to seek financial and military assistance. Although the northern Albanian tribes were equally suspicious of Montenegrin designs on their homeland, they had agreed this time to “shake hands with their southern Slavic brothers in order to resist the burden they jointly bore.” Though Doçi managed to return from Cetinje with a pledge of Montenegrin assistance and, what is equally important, a promise of non-interference, the rebellion proved a failure and was put down by Turkish troops in March 1877. Preng Doçi was captured, exiled to Constantinople, but later released and expelled to Rome. There, Cardinal Simeoni of the Propaganda Fide sent him to the west coast of Newfoundland where he worked as a missionary until 1881. To Doçi goes the honour, as far as we are aware, of being the first known Albanian resident of North America. Western Newfoundland’s rugged coastline and inhospitable climate, however, proved too much for Doçi, whose desire it was to return to his Mediterranean homeland. As a compromise, the Vatican transferred him to St John in New Brunswick, where he worked from October 1881 to March 1883. Upon his return to Rome, he was sent on another missionary assignment to India as secretary to Cardinal Agliardi, the Apostolic Delegate. In 1888, after years of petitioning and with the intercession of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Preng Doçi finally received permission from the Ottoman authorities to return to Albania. In January of the following year he was consecrated head of the Abbey Nullius of St Alexander of Orosh in Mirdita. This position enabled him to exercise considerable political and religious influence in the region for many years. He travelled to Vienna in 1897 to propose the creation of an autonomous Catholic principality in northern Albania under Mirdita leadership. With Ndoc Nikaj (1864-1951) and Gjergj Fishta, he founded the *Bashkimi* (Unity) literary society in 1899. They devised the so-called Bashkimi alphabet. Preng Doçi’s literary activity dated from 1870 when he contributed a poem for publication in *A Dora d’Istria gli Albanesi*, Leghorn 1870 (To Dora d’Istria, the Albanians). This short collection of Albanian verse, also dedicated to Dora d’Istria (1828-1882), was published by Demetrio Camarda (1821-1882). Doçi also authored some unpublished prose and other patriotic verse including *Shqypnia nën zgjedhë turke* (Albania under the Turkish Yoke) and *Shqypnia në robni* (Albania Enslaved).

The infrastructure established by the Catholic Church in northern Albania in the mid-nineteenth century, especially the educational facilities - the Albanian Pontifical Seminary and the Saverian College - bore fruit with time. The schools carried nineteenth-century Catholicism into one of the most backward areas of Europe. Simultaneously they brought the rudiments of western education and thought to a small but increasingly influential minority. The predominance of the foreign element in the church (including well-meaning but alien Italian missionaries as well as Macchiavellian Austrian church officials), gradually faded and gave way to a native and nationalist Albanian clergy who were interested in applying their language to the new possibilities of literary expression offered. Indeed the writers of the Scutarine Catholic tradition were generally quicker to devote their creative energies to ‘belles lettres’ in the Albanian language than were the representatives of the *Rilindja* literature of national awakening who concentrated their talents initially more on political writing and journalism. The early Scutarine Catholic literature was largely ignored by Marxist literary critics in twentieth-century Albania. Nevertheless the Scutarine Catholic writers helped transform Albanian into a literary medium capable of refined expression and stylistic variation.

Although not as insular and detached from the mainstream as the Muslim and Bektashi literature of the period, the Catholic current in late nineteenth-century Albanian literature, with its spiritual focus and concomitant thematic limitations, remained subordinate to the rising tide of Rilindja literature of romantic nationalism. Albania, after all, was not a Catholic country. In view of the Balkan country's misery as part of a rapidly decaying Ottoman Empire, the creative energies of mainstream Rilindja intellectuals of all faiths were concentrated primarily on stimulating national awareness and on uniting Albanians, irrespective of confessional borders. However, Scutarine Catholic literature did continue to thrive and indeed contributed substantially to the mosaic of Albanian culture throughout the first half of the twentieth century, until the turbulent course of Albanian history brought about its sudden demise in 1944.

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