

Charles Samaran, *Eulogy for the Reverend Father Paul Peeters*, foreign correspondent of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, trans. W.L. North from *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 94.4 (1950), pp. 320-322.

My Dear Colleagues,

On 18 August 1950, the Reverend Father Paul Peeters, S.J. died in Brussels at the age of 80 years old. He was President of the Bollandist Society which, after three centuries, maintains so rigorously the tradition of teamwork which was particularly dear, among us, to the Benedictine order. You elected him as a “foreign correspondent” in 1945 to replace Sir James Frazer at the request of our colleagues Jacques Zeiller¹ and Paul Pelliot² who, being familiar with his secret collaboration in the movement *Libre Belgique* during the previous war, knew that in him the patriot and the friend of France went side by side with the scholar.

The Reverend Father Paul Peeters was born on 20 September 1870 in Tournai. After intensive studies with the Jesuits of his hometown, who soon welcomed him into their ranks, he first dedicated himself simultaneously to the teaching of the classic humanities, to philosophy, to comparative grammar, and to the psychology of language. Nonetheless, since the Bollandists were seeking a specialist who would permit them in a decisive way to advance the research which they had undertaken on the lives and cults of the eastern saints. They placed their trust in Father Peeters whose gift with languages was well known to them—he had taught himself Armenian without a teacher and assisted only by the most basic learning aides—and he set to work.

Others, less dedicated or less stubborn, had quickly become discouraged before the immense task that awaited their colleague, because it did not take long to realize that this area of hagiography was almost completely devoid of proper originality because borrowing, imitation, plagiarism, and salesmanship had already blurred all the frontiers and that, in order to understand something, it was necessary to begin by mastering all the languages of the Christian East. Seizing every opportunity to learn in this area (for example, in Beirut where he made use of a period of convalescence to begin Arabic=, Father Peeters, who became a collaborator on the *Analecta Bollandiana* in that same year and in 1905 definitively joined the Bollandist Society, found himself from then on in a position to assemble and order the materials for the scholarly work that would bear the title *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis*, a precious repository—organized by saint’s name and published in 1910—of their lives that had been printed in Arabic, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, and Syriac.³ It is an incomparable research tool, yet it nonetheless has only the quality of a compilation.

For the truly constructive part of the work of Father Peeters, it is necessary to look, on the one hand, in the part of the *Acta Sanctorum*, tomes 3 and 4 for November, where he offered critical

¹ Jacques Zeiller (1878-1962) was a scholar of late antiquity and the development of Christianity; he was particularly interested in the history of Arianism.

² Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) was an eminent French Sinologist and student of Central Asia.

³ *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis*, ed. P. Peeters, S.J., Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1910.

editions of the Lives of saints in eastern languages and, on the other in the anonymous commentaries with which he enriched the *Hieronomian Martyrology* and the *Roman Martyrology*, which appeared successively in two folio volumes which bear the dates 1931 and 1940, and finally in the long series of articles which he contributed over almost fifty years to the *Analecta Bollandiana* in which he dedicated himself by choice to sort out the reciprocal interpenetration of the Christian literatures of the East.

A passionate lover of our culture, Father Peeters came as often as he could and, despite his great age he took his place among us. He brought original perspectives on the difficult problems which were his specialty, and those among us who have seen and understood him shall not forget his thin frame floating in his cassock, his gaunt face furrowed by smiles, and those piercing eyes which shined bright, sometimes, with mischief.

Honors, numerous and deserved, came to him but he did not seek or desire them. Director de la classe des lettres de l'Académie royale de Belgique, then President of this Académie, doctor honoris causa of the University of Strasbourg, and holder for the period 1936-1940 of the five-year-long Belgian prize in Historical Sciences, he received several months ago the honor of two volumes of *Mélanges* on which more than sixty-two scholars from many countries collaborated.⁴

Yet one can assert without fear that he was particularly moved by two witnesses of scholarly esteem: that which his colleagues, the successors of Bolland, gave him in 1941 in inviting him to take the place at their head of the great scholar whom you have also called to yourselves, the Reverend Father Delehaye; and finally that with which, four years later, you allowed him to call himself one of yours.

May the Society of the Bollandists, and in particular Father de Gaiffier d'Hestroy, who are school is honored to count among the number of its former students, wish to receive the most heartfelt condolences of our Company on the occasion of the loss that they have experienced in the person of the Reverend Father Peeters.

⁴ *Mélanges Paul Peeters* 2 vols, Analecta Bollandiana 67-68 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1949).