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MORE ON MOMBRITIUS, AND JOHN THE DEACON'S "LIFE OF ST NICHOLAS"

The first collection to be printed of the lives of the saints was issued in Milan in 1477 by Mombritius in two large folio volumes. These featured forms of the text which differed from subsequent collectors such as Lipomani, Surius and of course the Bollandists. But the volumes became so rare that two monks of the Solesmenses monastery in 1910 found it worthwhile to produce a fresh edition of it.^[1]

In fact the original volumes are now online, [here \(vol.1\)](#) and [here](#) (vol.2) thanks to the Bavarian State Library (=Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, BSB). The latter resource is becoming really invaluable for high-quality PDFs of early books and manuscripts.

Over the last couple of days I have been OCRing the text of the life of St Nicholas found in the 1910 reprint, which I obtained from Archive.org a few days ago. This I finished this afternoon. It was interesting to look through it, word by word. The monks reproduced even the printer's mistakes - "qni" for "qui"! - although they did mark these with a little superscript "+". Likewise they indicated the end of the column and end of the page with "|" and "||" respectively. I was obliged to read the Latin introduction with some care to determine the meaning of both these codes.

Once I had produced a Word document, I was distracted. Word complained about the number of spelling errors, and this led me to wonder if there was a Latin language spell-checker for Word. Indeed there is! It's called COL, and may be downloaded for free from [here](#). It's not perfect, but it does catch a lot.

But the longer I looked at the Mombritius text, the less I liked it. The punctuation is weird, the spelling is eccentric, and so forth. So it looks as if I shall be using the Falconius edition of 1751 instead, as the base for my translation, but consulting Mombritius.

This is a familiar feeling. We had this with the Life of St Valentine of Terni. It's not just a matter of translating a text. First find your text; and then you find that you must actually make your text yourself, from such pre-critical texts as are around. For St Valentine I felt obliged to include the text that I had made in order to translate it. It looks as if I shall be obliged to do the same here for John the Deacon.

This is annoying. I do not want or need to start editing texts. That is a quite separate enterprise. So my texts are not critical texts. They are simply what I could find, edited to remove annoying errors of spelling and punctuation, to produce a readable Latin text.

At this point I found myself wondering just why the texts of such major saints are not available in modern critical editions. The St Valentine was only available in the Bollandist edition of 1658 (!) and in a modern critical edition with very odd spelling.

For John the Deacon we are less lucky, as the Bollandists have not managed to produce an edition of his work, despite four centuries of work. But then four centuries pass easily if you don't do much in them. The Bollandists last printed a volume of the *Acta Sanctorum* in 1940. That is nearly 80 years ago. Since then they have only produced a couple of ancillary volumes. Producing critical texts of the Lives of the Saints is what the Bollandists exist to

do. So what the heck are they doing with their time? It seems to me that they need a kick up the backside.

1. ^[1]These details I owe to a brief review by H. Omont, found in Persee.fr [here](#).↩
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