

Mareska, Daniel-Joseph-Benoît

Born: September 9, 1803 – Ghent

Died: March 3, 1858 – Ghent

Mareska studies at the University of Ghent and graduates as a doctor of Sciences in 1826 with a thesis on the laws of dynamic electricity. He teaches mathematics at the Koninklijk Atheneum of Ghent and chemistry at the “*Nyverheyds-School*”. In 1829 he becomes a M.D. with a thesis in Latin on prophylaxis and the use of oxide of chlorine as a disinfectant.

When the University of Ghent closes down (see “*Jaequemeyns, Edouard*”) and the Free Faculty is instated, Mareska succeeds Jaequemeyns as professor of Chemistry. The presence of copper sulfate in bread is the subject of one of his first articles (1841) followed shortly after by two contributions about the nutritive value of fish-oils (cod-liver oil).

For the *Académie des Sciences* of Paris, Mareska publishes with Donny a number of articles on chemical subjects (among others about the properties of liquid and solid carbon dioxide).

In 1847 he is charged with the teaching of chemistry at the normaalschool but due to his frequent bouts of gout, he leaves most of this task to his assistant François Donny.

If Mareska had been British, Charles Dickens would have found a splendid subject for a book! Mareska’s father is a publican and his mother never married. In spite of his lower origins, Mareska completes successfully an academic career and becomes a socially engaged physician. In 1840 he is appointed medical director of the prison of Ghent. In 1846 he publishes an unflattering report on the hygienic conditions in the prisons of Ghent and Hemiksem and is troubled by the existing inhuman situations. In 1852 he publishes a study on the consequences of the internment of convicts. When following a potato famine, Flanders is struck by epidemics of typhus and dysentery, Mareska studies the problems.

His main contribution as evidence of his social solicitude is a thorough monograph, published with J. Heymans about the dreadful living conditions of the workers of the cotton-mills in the district “Batavia” in Ghent.

Mareska and Hubert Valerius (1820-1897) translate Friedrich Wöhler’s handbook of chemistry. He is member of the Provincial Medical Council and one of the founding-members of the Medical Society of Ghent.

In spite of his unfavorable background, Mareska has managed to pull himself up by his bootlaces to become a distinguished chemist and may be considered as one of the founders of social medicine.