

# THE NEW ZEALAND TABLET

TWENTY-NINTH YEAR OF PUBLICATION.

VOL. XXIX.—No. 10.

DUNEDIN: THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 1901.

PRICE 6D

## MESSAGE OF POPE LEO XIII. TO THE N.Z. TABLET.

Pergant Directores et Scriptores New Zealand Tablet, Apostolica Benedictione confortati, Religionis et Justitiæ causam promovere per vias Veritatis et Pacis.  
Die 4 Aprilis, 1900.

LEO XIII., P.M.

TRANSLATION.—Fortified by the Apostolic Blessing, let the Directors and Writers of the New Zealand Tablet continue to promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.  
April 4, 1900.

LEO XIII., Pope.

## Current Topics.

**A FABLE FROM THE WEST COAST.**  
VALERY divides historical error into two kinds. 'That which precedes truth,' says he, 'is only an ignorance of it; that which follows is a hatred of it.' The former class of historical heterodoxy is committed by an over-enthusiastic writer in the course of a controversy in the *Westport Times* on certain books, the presence of which on the shelves of the local public library was objected to as an insult to the faith and feelings of Catholics. The writer referred to enlivens the columns of the *Westport Times* with the following charming bit of historical fiction:—

Pope Clement VIII. received no less a total than 300,000 crowns under the rubric of quitrents or penalties for crime, from the wickedest man on record—Francesco Cenci. No fiction is half so damaging to the doings of the Papacy or half so hideous as the undeniable historical facts connected with the Cencis.

We notice this statement partly because it has given annoyance to many Catholics on the West Coast, partly because it is a case in which 'the insignificance of the accuser is lost in the magnitude of the accusation.' The writer referred to perpetrates his grim historic joke in apparently perfect simplicity and in a state of impressive earnestness and indignant good faith. He vouchsafes the information that the 'undeniable historical facts' to which he so darkly alludes are to be found in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. We now understand why the late Oliver Wendell Holmes poked such merciless sarcasm at the witless wights whose sole fount of historical information is a mere encyclopædia—the perusal of which has about as much relation to systematised historical knowledge as the reading of old almanacs has to the study of meteorology. The edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* from which our over-positive West Coast friend professes to draw his information must be a very old and frowsy one indeed—one of those that were written at a period when its publishers deemed it just to entrust the treatment of Catholic subjects to tenth-rate Protestant writers whose sole qualification for the work was, not their historical lore, but a capacity for putting forward an invariably hostile view with much needless heat and vapid declamation. The only editions before us are the two last—the eighth and the ninth. The eighth is a sufficiently reckless sinner in this respect. But its editors had sufficient conscience left to withdraw the wretched fairy tale quoted above regarding the 300,000 crowns. There is, moreover, nothing in it which reflects directly on the personal character of Clement VIII. In the ninth edition the story of the wretched Cencis is for the first time brought pretty closely into line with historical truth, and a cordial tribute is paid to the virtues of the saintly Pontiff whom the befogged writer in the *Westport Times* holds up to public odium on the authority of 'undeniable historical facts' which are merely undeniable historical fables.

**SENTIMENTAL NONSENSE.**  
A THICK web of sentimental nonsense has been spun by one or two wild-eyed poets and by the very small fry of reputed 'historians' about the story of the Cencis, and especially about that of Beatrice Cenci. The eighth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (in its article, 'Cenci') furnishes a melancholy example of how 'popular' history is manufactured, like cotton prints and tinned tacks, to suit a particular market.

It contains a few strands of truth, just as imported shoddy contains a few fibres of honest wool. Thus, it tells how Francesco Cenci, a Roman noble, was a man of very wicked private life; that he treated his second wife (who was childless) and the children of his first wife with great harshness and even cruelty; that he had illicit relations with his daughter Beatrice, who—strangely enough—is made the heroine of the little romance; that Francesco was most cruelly murdered at a country house (Petrella) to which he had retired in the summer of 1598; and that, after the judicial proceedings customary to the time, his wife, his daughter Beatrice, and one of his sons were executed in Rome in 1599 for complicity in his murder. So much of the story is faithful and true. But the small historian of the eighth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* tricks out these grains of fact with the glittering gewgaws of his perfervid fancy. Thus, we are told that Beatrice Cenci was a maiden of 'surpassing beauty,' 'formed to adorn and be admired'; (2) that she was 'gentle' and 'noble-minded'; (3) that Francesco's wife alone instigated the assassination of her husband; (4) that Shelley 'used a poet's license in implicating Beatrice unjustly in the guilt of her family'; that Guido Reni painted a portrait of 'the beautiful, the noble-minded, the ill-fated Beatrice Cenci' 'just before her execution'; and a charming variety of other gaudy scraps of fiction that it is not necessary to catalogue here.

THERE lies a wise appeal from Philip drunk GETTING AT THE FACTS. to Philip sober. And a like recourse may be had from the rabid *Encyclopædia Britannica* of its uncritical and hysterical days to the same publication in its later and soberer moods, when it made a conscious effort to write history sanely. Practically all the romance that surrounded the story of Beatrice Cenci in the eighth edition is swept away in the ninth. It has been scattered to the four winds of heaven by Moroni in his *Dizionario di Erudizione Storico-Ecclesiastica* (vol. xiv., pp. 50-51); by Rohrbacher (*Histoire Universelle de l'Eglise Catholique*, vol. xii.); by Muratori; by Bertolotti's painstaking investigations, the results of which appear in his *Beatrice Cenci e la sua Famiglia* (published in 1877); and by an able article on the subject in the *Edinburgh Review* for January, 1879.

Briefly: (1) Beatrice Cenci, instead of being so intolerably beautiful, had a rather plain face—one of the kind on which Kinglake used to waste such an unconscionable amount of sympathy. (2) Guido Reni never painted a portrait of her, either just before her execution, or at any other time, for the simple reason that he did not come to Rome till nine years after her death. The picture which is traditionally associated with her name is not, nor was it ever intended to be, a counterfeit presentment of her, but of some other maiden that was far more fayre to see. (3) Beatrice was a vicious creature, led an immoral life, and (as the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and all competent authorities agree) gave herself up to 'shameless depravity.' Her step-mother and the brother who were executed with her were also persons of bad character and evil life. (4) So far from being 'unjustly' implicated in the unnatural and brutal murder of her father, Beatrice was up to the eyebrows in the plot, was one of its chief instigators, and is known in history as 'the fair parricide.' (5) Beatrice and her partners in guilt