

## FEATURES OF THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

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

*Pergant Directores et Scriptores New Zealand Tablet, Apostolica Benedictione confortati, Religionis et Justitiae 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.



THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1921.

## DANTE ALIGHIERI



DANTE gave us Dante, and the world claims him for its own. In the high company of the immortals he stands for all time. "The world," he told us himself, "has become my country as the ocean is the country of the tribes of the deep." And when the Pope called on the scholars of Christendom to unite in honoring the supreme poet this week, on the occasion of the sixth centenary

of his death, the response was universal. In the past we have frequently touched on many phases of Dante's genius, and whatever we have left unsaid will be better said during the present month by lecturers who, even in far New Zealand, will fulfil the wishes of the Holy Father by putting before their audiences the deathless qualities of knowledge and imagination which, after six hundred years, still burn like a white flame in the masterpieces of the Florentine poet. The occasion, however, is one that we cannot allow to pass without special attention, and while leaving to the various lecturers who will honor the centenary celebrations the task of fuller treatment of the subject we will limit ourselves at present to commenting on the debt Dante owed to certain Irish traditions.

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Dr. Gardner, a Dante scholar, says: "For some of the external features, the *Divina Comedia* absorbed and is in part colored by Irish elements as it flows down into the great ocean of mysticism. But when we pass to the deeper, more permanent significance of the sacred poem, where it no longer is a debatable question of indebtedness in minor details and particulars, we find writers of the Celtic race in the front rank of Dante's precursors, and through John Scottus Erigena and Richard St. Victor, it may be fairly claimed for Ireland that she provided the spiritual cosmography and the mystical psychology of the crowning portion of the greatest poem in the modern world." To this testimony, Renan also adds the weight of his authority: "It cannot be doubted for a moment, after the able researches of Ozanam, Labitte, and Wright, that to the number of poetical themes which Europe owes to the genius of the Celts is to be added the framework of the *Divina Comedia* of Dante." Two classes of Irish legends have influenced the external form of the great Italian poem: the overseas voyages of the Irish

mariners who sought the Happy Isles and the visions of Hell and Heaven vouchsafed to various Irish saints. There are incidents in Dante's cantos which resemble forcibly the accounts of the voyages of Brendan, which were well known throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, and there are many passages which suggest an acquaintance with the visions of St. Fursey. Sir Francis Palgrave says: "Tracing the course of thought upwards we have no difficulty in deducing the poetic genealogy of Dante's *Inferno* to the Milesian Furseus." And when St. Fursey recognises in Purgatory St. Beanus and St. Meldanus, giving their whole discourse, with the concluding message: "To the Chief Priests of the Holy Church announce that God is jealous against those who love the world more than Him," we find in Irish legend the keynote of Dante's whole work. It is worth recording also that when the angels were bringing back Fursey the demons threw at him a burning body which scorched him. Compare this incident with the tradition that the people of Verona used to look at Dante as he passed along the streets and whisper to one another: "There is the man who was in Hell, and whose skin is still dark from the smoke and flame below." Of the vision of St. Adamnan, Mr. Boswell says: "The punishments described contain many striking points of similarity to Dante, both in their kind and in the vivid manner in which they are portrayed." Other sources from which it is supposed that the poet drew were the accounts of the vision of Tundal, written in Latin in the twelfth century by Marcus, an Irish monk, and of the visit of the Knight Owen to St. Patrick's Purgatory. The similarity in the former case is striking. Tundal is beset with evil spirits at the outset of his vision until rescued by an angel who is to be his guide. The relations between the angel and Tundal resemble closely those between Dante and Virgil. Like Dante, Tundal describes many historical personages with whom he meets. Dante saw a place kept empty in readiness for Henry of Luxemburg, and Tundal also asked a question concerning a wondrously adorned seat whereon no man sat, and got the answer: "This seat is for a certain one of our brethren who hath not yet departed the body, but when he hath departed shall sit thereon." In the closing scene when Bernard was to be the guide the similarity is again remarkable. Again there is a link through the monk Richard (an Irish contemporary of Marcus) who became a Canon of St. Victor, about the year 1140. In defending himself for certain things he had written Dante appeals to Richard's work, *De Contemplatione*, while to Scottus he undoubtedly owes many a suggestion from the translation of the Dionysian work on the Celestial Hierarchy, done into Latin by Scottus, who was one of the greatest thinkers of the Middle Ages.

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Briefly the foregoing are the Celtic sources from which Dante drew inspiration for the poem that "made him lean." We will end this sketch with an appreciation from the pen of Mr. Clement Shorter, who is known to Irish readers as Dora Sigerson's husband: "The statement that Dante was 'the greatest poet in all the world' will only carry conviction to a portion of my readers. Homer and Virgil have first place with many. To the average Englishman that place belongs to Shakspeare; to the Germans, Goethe; to each nation its own most prominent poet. But to those who have a suitable sense of the meaning of great literature, Dante stands at the very head of the procession. To know well the *Divine Comedy*, even in a translation, is to be immune from too much worship of the mediocre gods of modern idolatry. . . . If I were to give advice to a young man or young woman on the threshold of his or her career and with a passion for literature, I should insist that sanity of outlook, a freedom from the crude cranks which beset every decade could best be obtained by a devotion to Dante."

"My diocese," says Bishop Schuler of El Paso, "contains 68,000 square miles. Babies baptised by one of my priests to-day may ask him to perform their marriage ceremony when he is able to complete his rounds again."