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KICKING WITH THE OTHER FOOT: DANTE IN IRELAND, BETWEEN SECTARIANISM AND NATIONALISM[1]

DARAGH O'CONNELL, University College Cork

This essay interrogates how various Dante commemorations (1921, 1965, 2015, 2021) have been pressed into the modes of memory management on the island of Ireland. In particular, the 1921 commemoration came at a moment of great historical importance for the emerging (almost) independent state and Dante becomes a vector for all manner of biases, pieties and iconoclasm. At the heart of these Irish commemorations is the aim to celebrate a Dante different from British iterations and one that is made fit with a projected Irishness. What emerges from these peculiar commemorative acts is an Irish Dante oddly reflective more of the contemporary Ireland commemorating than Dante the poet, present elsewhere in Irish cultural production (Joyce, Beckett).

Keywords: Ireland, Catholic Church, Nationalism, Joyce, Anglo-Irish Treaty

The commemorative act differs radically when taken out of its original setting and pressed into the modes of memory management in a new terrain. Whereas national commemorations often seek to police memory, invent nostalgia or articulate counter-memories in tune with the ideologies of the commemorators, transnational commemorations, by their very nature, invoke different memorial needs, and re-imagine specific pasts for present purposes indistinguishable from the local. The politics of national commemoration are fraught with counter-narratives, and yet when something that is ostensibly foreign to a culture is deemed appropriate for commemoration, it is quite rapidly domesticated and made to contain many of the qualities the commemorating

[1] I am grateful to my colleague Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin for his generosity and sharing many materials with me and the draft of his forthcoming essay 'Irish Images of Dante, 1921-2021: Three Centuries, Five Exhibitions.' My focus here differs as for the purposes of this essay I am dealing exclusively with the commemoration years 1921, 1965, 2015 and 2021.

culture seeks to project of itself. The Dante commemorations which took place in Ireland between his sexcentenary in 1921 and the septicentennial celebrations of 2021 offer an intriguing insight into how the new (almost independent) Ireland – struggling initially to gain a foothold on the international stage and affirm a culture that was pointedly not British, ultimately becoming a modern-day Ireland, confident in its place in the world – oddly defined itself in and through Dante. Indeed, Dante becomes the vector for all manner of biases – political and religious – piety and iconoclasm, in whom the Irish sought to define themselves. However, alongside this official "Irish Dante" was an emerging and equally subversive Dante, modernist and secular, polylingual and polyphonic, and no less Irish for all that.[2]

"A Terrible Beauty is Born" (1921)[3]

On the editorial pages of the daily *Irish Independent*, on December 7, 1921, we read the following announcement:

> THE DANTE CELEBRATIONS
>
> The Ministry of Fine Arts of Dáil Éireann [*the breakaway Irish government*] has done well in calling together a national gathering to celebrate the sexcentenary of Dante. Ireland is at last taking her place in the European comity, and she is ready to show that all that pertains to the cultural heritage of our Western civilisation is of interest to her. Before, indeed, there was any ceremonial occasion to pay tribute to the great Florentine, we in Dublin had a Dante Society devoted to the study of the Divine Comedy. […]. May we not hope that yesterday's meeting in the Mansion House to honour the memory of this great poet of Catholic medievalism might result in the formation of a new Dante Society wider in its appeal than the old?[4]

The date, December 7, is highly significant for Irish history. To set this in context for those unfamiliar with the basic rudiments of Ireland's complex modern history: the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed on the night of December 6, 1921, after a bloody War of

[2] See my "An Irish Dante, Part II: A Dantean Afterlife," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 444 (2022): 401-11. The first part was published in earlier issue: "An Irish Dante, Part I: Possible Precursors to the *Commedia*," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 442 (2022): 125-33. See also Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin, "Dante's Adventures in Ireland, 1785-2021," in *Dante nel mondo*, ed. Massimo Bacigalupo and Francesco De Nicola (Genoa: Accademia Ligure di Scienze e Lettere, 2021), 152-80.

[3] "A terrible beauty is born" is a verse from the W.B. Yeats poem "Easter 1916."

[4] *Irish Independent*, December 7, 1921.

Independence, which began in 1919. On the same page of the paper reporting the Dante commemoration, rather incongruously, we read:

> THE IRISH FREE STATE
>
> In the early hours of Tuesday morning a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland was signed at Downing Street by both delegations. With the signing of this document a memorable chapter in Irish History and in Anglo-Irish relations has been opened.

Oddly, more prominence is accorded to the "Dante Festival" as concrete details had yet to emerge from London concerning the political events. The Treaty provided the establishment of the Irish Free State, though subsequently it allowed in its provisions for six of the counties constituting the province of Ulster to remain part of the United Kingdom. The Irish Free State was the precursor for what would later become the Republic of Ireland. The signatories of the Treaty had plenipotentiary status and included among others, on the British side, the then Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies; on the Irish side, Arthur Griffith, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Michael Collins, Secretary for Finance. The negotiations took place in London and lasted two months. However, the contents of the Treaty divided the Republican leadership in two, with Éamon de Valera, who presided over the meeting at the Mansion House for the Dante Festival on the day the Treaty was signed, coming out against it on December 8. A series of Dáil parliament debates took place over the ensuing weeks and the Treaty was ratified on 7 January 1922 by a vote of 64 to 57. This division between pro- and anti-Treaty factions ultimately led to the outbreak of the Irish Civil War on June 28, 1922. Collins, one of the main signatories, was ambushed and killed in 1922, and another, Griffith, had died of stroke and heart failure ten days earlier. However, on December 6, on the eve of this split between those who had fought for Irish independence, why, we may well ask, were they celebrating Dante in the first place? What was it about Dante as a figure that led the leadership of the Irish republican movement to think of commemorating his death in Ravenna six hundred years before?

These were not the only Dante commemorations to take place in Ireland in 1921, and the minor flurry of activity from September to the close of the year reflects as much the religious and cultural divisions in Irish society in the immediate aftermath of the War of Independence as it does any real appreciation of Dante.

On Wednesday September 14, 1921, the *Irish Times* reported on the official Italian Dante commemorations taking place to mark the centenary in Ravenna, Florence and Rome.[5] The author of the article comments that to us Dante "is one of the five or six greatest poets of the world," but for Italy he is even more. Gabriele D'Annunzio's gesture of sending a sack of laurel leaves by aeroplane is also reported, as is the poet's decision to not make a more vocal homage to Dante. The article goes on to suggest that the celebrations in Italy constitute a "formal recantation of the treatment which Dante suffered at his country's hands, a formal act of thanksgiving and pride, a formal establishment of the nation's poet and prophet in the noblest niche of the national Pantheon." It further states that this is not solely an Italian affair as the "whole civilised world associates itself with these honours; for Dante is an inspiring force in the literature of both hemispheres." Interestingly, the article concludes by stating that:

> […] no other country recognised his genius more quickly than England or has fallen more fully under the spell of his beauty of speech and thought. […] There has been nothing Protestant in British allegiances to Catholicism's greatest poet. Dante has been a curiously slight inspiration in Anglo-Irish literature; but from Ireland too, a faithful band will go forth in spirit to the Florentine and Roman ceremonies.

That "curiously slight inspiration" was about to undergo a radical transformation during European modernism when James Joyce and Samuel Beckett both demonstrated the impact that a "vernacular" Dante had on their respective poetics.[6] But the point that England had been quick to embrace Dante was undoubtedly true, and spoke to a centuries-old interest and appropriation of Dante into British culture. Indeed, by the year of the centenary in 1921 Dante was also, above and beyond the official British commemorations, very

[5] "The Genius of Dante," *Irish Times*, September 14, 1921, 4 (author unknown).

[6] Both Joyce and Beckett graduated in Italian as part of their undergraduate degrees, and therefore read Dante in Italian. Joyce studied at University College Dublin, whereas Beckett studied at Trinity College Dublin. There is a vast bibliography relating to Dante's influence on Joyce and Beckett. Suffice it here to mention some of the more important monographs: Mary T. Reynold's, *Dante and Joyce: The Shaping Imagination* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Lucia Boldrini, *Joyce, Dante, and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in "Finnegans Wake"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); James Robinson, *Joyce's Dante: Exile, Memory and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and the Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

much subsumed into British popular culture to which the following illustration attests (fig. 1):[7]

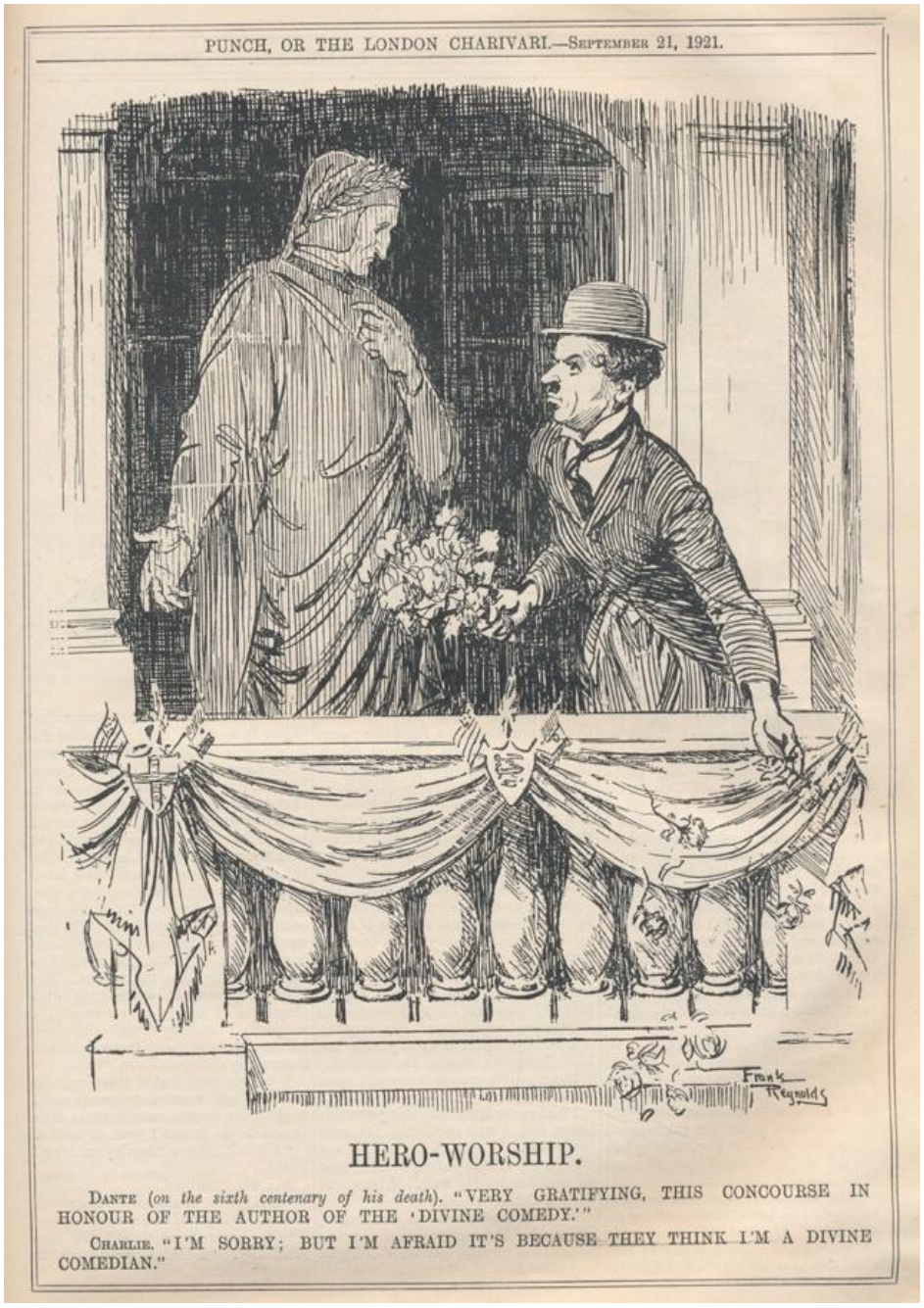

Figure 1. A very British Dante: *Punch*, September 21, 1921.

However, there was no such easy relationship for an Irish Dante, nor could there have been, given the need to weigh down the Florentine with significance that went far beyond the commemorative function.

[7] "Hero-Worship," *Punch*, September 21, 1921. The artist was Frank Reynolds. I am very grateful to Chris Williams for bringing this image to my attention.

The Irish Dante to emerge from the 1921 celebrations is one which reflects a rising culture, soon to become dominant, that sought to redefine and redress Dante in its image. Equally, Dante becomes a mosaic of different Irelands – real and imagined – with each tessera a testament to the fault-lines on the island. Taken chronologically, the Irish Dante events unfolded from September to the "Dante Festival" in the Mansion House in December before the close of the centenary year, and offer a fascinating insight into cultural and religious tensions on the cusp of transformation. On the one side is the largely well-heeled, Protestant (mostly Anglican Church of Ireland) pro-British establishment, which still held sway through institutional prestige in places like Trinity College Dublin; and on the other, the "unofficial" Government of the day, veterans of the 1916 Easter Rising and the War of Independence, mostly Catholic, and decidedly Republican. With the cessation of hostilities in July, followed by an uneasy truce and the Treaty negotiations underway, some semblance of normal life returned to Ireland and finally there was space for Dante to be remembered in his centenary year. The first official Dante commemoration took place at Trinity College Dublin two weeks after the *Irish Times* article mentioned above. Trinity College, the only constituent college of the University of Dublin, was founded in 1592 and is Ireland's oldest university. For many in the general populace around the time of the events considered here, it was seen as one of the last remaining bastions of a British ethos and system of privilege.[8] The event was advertised in the *Irish Times*:

> Dante Commemoration
>
> Today at 3.30, Regent House, T.C.D.
>
> The Provost will chair two lectures.
>
> One in Italian, Sir Robert Tate, K.B.E., "The Position of Italian Studies in the University"
>
> Dr. Rudmose-Brown, Professor of Romance Languages, "The Place of Dante in Literature"
>
> The Lord Lieutenant and Viscountess Fitzalan have signified their intention of being present.[9]

[8] See R. B. McDowell and David A. Webb, *Trinity College Dublin 1592-1952: An Academic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
[9] *Irish Times*, Tuesday September 27, 1921.

Though advertised in a national newspaper, the event did not seem to elicit much interest. The presence of the dignitaries mentioned may not have helped in this regard. Not to be outdone, a month later at a meeting of the Catholic Truth Society at the Mansion House, there was a series of talks on Dante which was reported on in the *Irish Times* the following day.[10] Interestingly, the article gave prominence to just one speaker, Rev. R. Fleming C.C., whose talk can best be described as an *apologia* for an incontrovertibly Catholic Dante. As reported in the paper, the mere fact that the Pope had issued a special encyclical on the occasion of the centenary should suffice to rouse Catholics around the world to learn something about Dante:[11] "Dante speaks with reverence and love of the infallible mysteries of religion, recognises the necessities of faith – not merely a confiding trust, as Protestants would have it, but an intellectual assent." It goes on that Dante denies the Protestant doctrine that the individual is free to have his own judgement, and to form his own view with regard to revealed truths. Throughout his speech the Rev. Fleming seems to have practised all manner of intellectual and verbal contortions to allow no criticism of Catholic hegemony. Dante, for example, was wrong historically, according to Fleming, in making Pope Anastasius fall into heresy: "but even then the Church has never contended that the Pope, as a private theologian or thinker, may not possibly entertain heretical views, for only in his official capacity as teacher of faith and morals is he, providentially secure from error."

Moreover, Fleming used the occasion to refute the notion that Dante was a precursor of the Reformation, as some writers would have it, those who according to him were driven by "prejudice and blindness." In order to demonstrate this he claimed that the whole system of Catholic doctrine and morals – if all the

[10] "Dante and the Church. His work and his worth: A Spiritual Force," *Irish Times*, Saturday, October 22, 1921, 8.

[11] The encyclical to which he refers is the *In Praeclara Summorum: Encyclical of Pope Benedict XV on Dante to Professors and Students of Literature and Learning in the Catholic World* (April 30, 1921). In it the Pope writes: "Among the many celebrated geniuses of whom the Catholic faith can boast who have left undying fruits in literature and art especially, besides other fields of learning, and to whom civilization and religion are ever in debt, highest stands the name of Dante Alighieri, the sixth centenary of whose death will soon be recorded. Never perhaps has his supreme position been recognized as it is today. Not only Italy, justly proud of having given him birth, but all the civil nations are preparing with special committees of learned men to celebrate his memory that the whole world may pay honour to that noble figure, pride and glory of humanity."
https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xv_enc_30041921_in-praeclara-summorum.html (Accessed 16/06/2023)

libraries in the world were destroyed, and the Holy Scriptures with them – "might be reconstructed from the *Divina Commedia*." Rhetorically, it is a very effective hypothesis, which seeks to wrestle Dante back from Protestant (and, by extension, English) hands. The whole tenor of his speech is markedly anti-Protestant, and therefore unambiguously sectarian. For example, the English Dante scholar Edward Moore is described as someone "haunted by the bogey of Protestant minds." According to Fleming, Dante merely let himself be carried away by his intense hatred of Boniface VIII, and this, ostensibly, is the reason why he has Boniface grant absolution to Guido da Montefeltro in *Inferno* XXVII, for such an accusation was as absurd then as it is now.[12] The article rounds off with scarce treatment given to the other speakers, but we do learn that a Miss McMahon suggested the substitution of Dante for Shakespeare in the schools. This proposition was never embraced and Shakespeare remains fixed on the Irish secondary school syllabus to this day; no one has since entertained the idea of introducing Dante either to replace or stand with Shakespeare. Of more interest to our current purpose, another speaker at the event, Count Plunkett, announced at the meeting that a Dante celebration would be held in the Mansion House on December 6, at which he invited the clergy and the laity to assist.

In fact, this Count Plunkett was the driving-force behind the 1921 "Dante Festival." George Noble Plunkett (1851-1948) was a Papal Count and a multifaceted character. A former Director of the National Museum and Gallery, art historian, bibliophile, philanthropist and barrister, he was Member of Parliament for

[12] On this topic Pope Benedict XV writes in the *In Praeclara Summorum*: "But, it will be said, he inveighs with terrible bitterness against the Supreme Pontiffs of his times. True; but it was against those who differed from him in politics and he thought were on the side of those who had driven him from his country. One can feel for a man so beaten down by fortune, if with lacerated mind he breaks out sometimes into words of excessive blame, the more so that, to increase his feeling, false statements were being made by his political enemies ready, as always happens, to give an evil interpretation to everything. And indeed, since, through mortal infirmity, "by worldly dust even religious hearts must needs be soiled" (St. Leo M. S. IV de Quadrag), it cannot be denied that at that time there were matters on which the clergy might be reproved, and a mind as devoted to the Church as was that of Dante could not but feel disgust while we know, too, that reproof came also from men of conspicuous holiness. But, however he might inveigh, rightly or wrongly, against ecclesiastical personages, never did he fail in respect due to the Church and reverence for the "Supreme Keys"; and on the political side he laid down as rule for his views "the reverence which a good son should show towards his father, a dutiful son to his mother, to Christ, to the Church, to the Supreme Pastor, to all who profess the Christian religion, for the safeguarding of truth" (*Mon.* III, 3)."

Roscommon North, and a former Minister for Foreign Affairs.[13] He was father of one of the signatories of the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic and leaders of the Easter Rising, Joseph Plunkett, who was executed by a British firing squad at the age of twenty-eight. In November of 1921 Count Plunkett was moved aside from Foreign Affairs to the position of Minister for the short-lived Department for Fine Arts. His first official act as Minister was the establishment of the "Dante Festival" in the Mansion House in December of that year.

However, before this could happen, Trinity College Dublin organised yet another public lecture on Dante. The event was again advertised in the *Irish Times*:[14] "Professor Rudmose-Brown will deliver, in the Regent House, Trinity College Dublin on Thursday 24th at 3.30 a public lecture upon 'Dante and the Provençal Poets'." Again, no trace of the lecture remains, but it is worth bearing in mind that Trinity in fact staged two separate Dante lectures within a month of each other. And Rudmose-Brown was at the centre of both. Interestingly, on the same day as his second lecture, Rudmose-Brown also penned a very tetchy letter to Count Plunkett on the issue surrounding the invitation of Trinity College Faculty to the Dante Commemoration in December. It is worth quoting in full:

> Dear Sir,
>
> Professor Stockley has most kindly allowed me to see a letter from you about the Dante Celebration. I would like, if I may, to correct one or two errors into which you have been unwittingly led.
>
> You did not give T.C.D. a fair chance. When you asked Mr Culverwell, Dr. Turner, Mr. Alton and Prof. Trench, you did not ask, at the same time, the most likely Professor in T.C.D., namely myself, the Professor of Romance Languages, nor the titular lecturer in Italian, Sir R.W. Tate. Had I been asked then, I should certainly have accepted. So would no doubt others of my colleagues, who were not asked. I do not suggest that you should have asked me or them, that was entirely your own affair. But do not condemn T.C.D. without sufficient data.
>
> As it is, I hope that you will see a goodly band of us on Dec 6th – as spectators. I have accepted your invitation. So have, or will, several

[13] See his entry in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*: https://www.dib.ie/biography/plunkett-count-george-noble-a7384 (Accessed 16/06/2023).
[14] *Irish Times*, Monday November 21, 1921.

> others. As to the T.C.D. Dante celebrations, we claimed to speak for no one but ourselves. We issued very few formal invitations. But we did formally invite the Lord Mayor, the Presidents of U.C.D, and Maynooth, and the Archbishop Elect of Dublin. None of these answered our invitation.
>
> Some of my colleagues have conscientious objections to the invitation of a *de facto* Government until it is also (to their satisfaction) *de jure*. From this point of view it might perhaps have been more acceptable to T.C.D. had the Lord Mayor issued the invitations and the Chairman been the Chancellor of the National University without his Presidential title. However, that again is no affair of mine or of ours. I, personally, wish you every success in your Dante celebration and I shall make a point of being present. But please don't accuse us all of "childish churlishness." Very few of us merit such a stigma. We do not desire to stand aloof.
>
> Pray pardon my presumption and [*illegible here*],
> T.B. Rudmose-Brown.
>
> P.S. By the way, the T.C.D. Dante meeting was advertised in the Freeman, Independent and the Irish Times, + all were invited.[15]

The letter reveals many of the unarticulated tensions present in Ireland at this moment of transition. Perhaps most revealing, when Rudmose-Brown refers to the preference for the Chairman of the National University not to use his "Presidential title," and this is underlined in the manuscript, he is pointing to the unease many on the old establishment side felt about Éamon de Valera, as President of the Irish Republic.[16] To accept him as President of the Republic, was to accept that Ireland was no longer British. Rudmose-Brown's letter reflects many of the attitudes prevalent in Trinity at the time. Where he himself stood on the Irish question is harder to define, though not really pressing for the purposes of this essay. Moreover, this is not some petty academic rivalry between universities, but rather a contested site as to who should

[15] Thomas B. Rudmose-Brown, *Letter from T.B. Rudmose Brown to George Noble Plunkett, Count Plunkett, about an issue surrounding the invitation of Trinity College Dublin faculty to the Dante Commemoration, with Plunkett's Reply.* The Letter is available in the National Library of Ireland's online catalogue: https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000588385 (Accessed 16/06/2023). It is part of the *Count Plunkett Papers 1648-1940* Collection.

[16] De Valera was not the Chairman but the Chancellor of the National University of Ireland. Having been elected to that office in July 1921, De Valera continued as Chancellor for 54 years while also fitting occuping several pivotal roles at various junctures such as being Taoiseach, President of Ireland, President of the Assembly of the League of Nations.

guide and perform official commemorative functions. Evidently, Rudmose-Brown – after having delivered two lectures on Dante – felt that he was the one. Plunkett's response is no less interesting. Written the following day and neatly avoiding some of Rudmose-Brown's major points, it states:

> Nov. 25 1921
>
> Dear Mr. Rudmose-Brown,
>
> I am glad to understand from your welcome letter that Trinity College will be pretty largely represented at the Dante commemoration in the Mansion House. I had intended to be present at your lecture yesterday but urgent affairs prevented me. After nearly half a century my alma mater still has a grip on my affections, believe me.
>
> Yours sincerely,
>
> P.S. The Lord Mayor writes me "I have no recollection of ever having received an invitation to Trinity College for the Dante Celebration."
>
> G.N.P.[17]

In reality, Plunkett largely ignores Rudmose-Brown's protestations, but does remind him that he was once a student at Trinity himself, before revealing in the postscript that the Lord Mayor had not, in fact, received an invitation and thereby casting doubt on some of the assertions made by Rudmose-Brown. The latter, by dint of his title, and without anyone at Trinity to suggest otherwise, considered himself the Dante expert and that he should therefore have been given pride of place among the speakers at Plunkett's commemoration – this is the least we can infer from the letter. This is the same Rudmose-Brown, it has to be said, who once lectured and mentored the young Samuel Beckett. Late in his life Beckett recalled in a letter to Roger Little: "I cannot go back to my dim student days. Much needed light came to me from Ruddy, from his teaching and friendship. I think of him often and always with affection and gratitude."[18] However, in the same letter he does go on to clarify that Rudmose-Brown "had no part in the Dante revelation. This I seem to have managed on my own, with

[17] The manuscript is in effect a draft letter with many corrections and emendations: https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000588385 (Accessed 16/06/2023).

[18] Samuel Beckett, "18 May 1983, Roger Little," in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1966-1989*, vol. 4, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 610.

the help of my Italian teacher, Bianca Esposito."[19] Indeed, McDowell and Webb write that Rudmose-Brown "never laid claim to any deep knowledge of languages other than French and Provençal, and the change in the title of his chair to that of French in 1937 was long overdue." Moreover, they add that he was a "difficult man to estimate, for his undoubted literary sensitivity and awareness of contemporary French poetry was masked by a partly assumed cynicism and an all too genuine laziness."[20] The upshot in all this is that he did not make the podium at the Mansion House when Plunkett's national "Dante Festival" finally came to fruition, though he was said to have been in attendance.

Sadly, no record of the actual speeches remain, and thus we must rely on the somewhat overly enthusiastic newspaper reports from the following day. What is noteworthy is that no Protestants spoke at the event. Éamon de Valera, as President of the Dáil and still-to-be-recognised Irish Republic, chaired the event. Laurence Walsh, who was private secretary to Count Plunkett at the Ministry of Fine Arts, reminisced about the event in a newspaper article some forty years later. He writes:

> We could not then foresee that the date was to become a memorable one in Irish history. On the morning of that day at 2.15 a.m. the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in London. All Ireland was agog with excitement. The news of the signature of the Treaty had arrived in Dublin but its terms were not yet known and its full implications not yet analysed. Naturally the burning topic of the Treaty overshadowed the Dante Commemoration but the latter proceeded as arranged.[21]

He states that de Valera was present in full academic robes as Chancellor of the National University of Ireland, Lord Mayors in full regalia, representatives from the Universities and Cultural Institutes, bishops and clergy and ministers of the new-born state "on whose heads heavy prices had recently lain." Such was the appeal of the event that a "vast throng of the general public filled the Round Room of the Mansion House and overflowed into Dawson Street." In all, six papers were read: three in English, two in Irish and one in Italian. A paper by Alfred O'Rahilly – a future

[19] Bianca Esposito (1879-1961) was the daughter of composer and Dublin music teacher Michele Esposito. For more on Rudmose-Brown's intellectual formation see Roger Little, "Beckett's Mentor, Rudmose-Brown: Sketch for a Portrait," *Irish University Review*, 14.1 (Spring 1984): 34-41.
[20] R.B. McDowell & D.A. Webb, *Trinity College Dublin 1592-1952*, 458.
[21] Laurence Walsh, "Dante and the Treaty: A Commemoration of Forty Years Ago," *Irish Times*, December 7, 1961, 11.

President of University College Cork – "Dante To-day" was read by the Bishop of Cork, the Rev. Dr. Cohalan, and traced the life, philosophy and poetry of Dante. This was followed by Piaras Béaslaí, who spoke in Irish – "Dante agus na Gaedhil" – and very much placed the accent on Dante's use of the vernacular and the importance that language had in unifying Italy centuries later. Thus, Béaslaí pressed Dante into the service of nationalism and language politics, the implications of which could not have been missed by the audience at the event. As reported in the *Irish Independent*, according to Béaslaí: "If Ireland had produced a Dante in the national language she would have produced a potent force against the Partition of Ireland."[22] The irony here is that Ireland had in fact already produced its very own Dante unbeknownst to the vast majority inside the Mansion House, but in order to escape the twin snares of Empire and Church he had chosen the path of voluntary exile from Ireland and wrote in a vernacular unshackled by the conventions of standard English: his name, James Joyce, and his great masterpiece, *Ulysses*, would be published a few months later in Paris.

The third speaker was the Franciscan Fr Joseph Lynch, who delivered a lecture entitled "Dante and the Franciscans," in which he reiterated the tradition that maintained that Dante had been a Franciscan novice. According to the columnist in *The Freeman's Journal*, Dante embodied the Franciscan spirit, and such was his respect for the Order that he was buried with them in Ravenna, an order "he eulogised in words that would never grow dim."[23] The following paper, in Irish, was from Máire Ní Chinnéide, on the theme of Dante and women – "Dante agus na Mná." She maintained that the Florentine displayed more respect for women than men, and that his praise of Beatrice, a real, living woman, constituted the highest form of praise, save that for the Mother of God. In addition to directing the musical programme for the evening, Professor Adelio Viani of the Royal Irish Academy of Music delivered the fifth paper of the evening – "Ombre e luci in Dante." How many of the assembled guests in the Mansion House understood Viani's Italian is difficult to say, but according to Lawrence Walsh's recollections, Viani stated that Dante was a universal poet, whose sorrow and hope and light belonged to all the world: "He embodied in himself the sufferings of the Universe,

[22] "Irish Tributes to Dante," *Irish Independent*, December 7, 1921, 6.
[23] "The Memory of Dante: Ireland's Tribute to the Great Italian Poet," *The Freeman's Journal*, December 7, 1921.

and by his hope and courage helped to guide humanity to the glories of the Deity."[24] The *Irish Independent* reported: "Professor Viani's Italian oration was praised by the scholarly, and for the music of its delivery, enjoyed by the unlearned."[25] The final paper of the evening was Count Plunkett's "Dante and Art," in which the main organiser of the commemoration addressed the notion of Art and Dante's influence on various artists, including Raphael, Botticelli and Michelangelo, and later artistic schools. Plunkett's wide-ranging lecture homed in on the influence on Dante of the legends of the Irish saints Brendan and Fursey and the varied accounts of Saint Patrick's Purgatory.

Ultimately, the Dante commemoration served to allow its organisers to restate the importance of the national language, to recast Dante, not as the same figure much lauded in Britain, but as a Catholic poet, which chimed with the new Ireland, and also, most importantly, to conscript Dante into placing the accent on culture: the new Ireland, however it would define itself in political terms to take its place among the nations, would also need to affirm itself culturally, and Dante – a nationalist, non-imperialist, Catholic Dante – served that need well. The Irish Dante of 1921 was very much a Dante of an aspiring nation, whose main mode of self-expression was to define itself as not British.

1965

By the time the commemorations for the septicentenary of Dante's birth came around in 1965, the Ireland that, decades earlier, had been fought for was not perhaps how the Irish imagined it would be. The Irish Free State adopted a new constitution in 1937, thus continuing the process of gradual separation from the British Empire that Irish governments had pursued since the time of the Treaty. However, Ireland only officially became a fully independent Republic in 1949. The idea of an Ireland, proud in her traditions, yet modern and completely unshackled from British influence, was very far from the reality. Many of the tensions which had precipitated the Civil War remained largely the same: Northern Ireland was still partitioned politically from the rest of the island and remained part of the United Kingdom; it was ruled by a Protestant majority which did everything in its power – by means

[24] Laurence Walsh, "Dante and the Treaty: A Commemoration of Forty Years Ago," *Irish Times*, December 7, 1961, 11.
[25] "Irish Tributes to Dante," *Irish Independent*, December 7, 1921, 6.

of electoral gerrymandering and discriminatory practices in housing and employment – to ensure that the Catholic minority remained in its place; on the rest of the island, the nation that had been fought for – and which was supposed to be secular, equal in its treatment of all of its citizens, modern, self-sufficient – had so far failed to materialize on nearly every count.[26] Ireland continued to export many of her problems – every year thousands left for Britain and the US to find gainful employment. What is more, in the decades which followed the Civil War, the Catholic Church gained a foothold – some would say a stranglehold – on almost every aspect of public and domestic life: education and health were almost completely under the aegis of the Church, which practised all manner of coercive control, especially with regard to sexual mores and women's health. If anything, Ireland had gone backwards. Added into this mix was the uncertainty around Ireland's very own upcoming commemoration: the 50th anniversary of the 1916 rising. How would Ireland define herself?

Once again, a Dante centenary offers an interesting snapshot of an Ireland on the cusp of change. However, this occasion was noticeably different from that of 1921 in that since 1954 Ireland, in recognition of its independence, now had an *Istituto Italiano di Cultura*, and thus any commemoration of Dante would be able to align itself with the Italian state. In 1965 the Director of the Institute, Guido Bistolfi, was quick to embrace the potential for collaboration and to drive commemorative initiatives. One initiative was a nationwide art competition, inviting affirmed and new and established artists to produce works of art inspired by the *Commedia*: the exhibition was called *Interpretations from the Divine Comedy*. The results were impressive and the winners exhibited and published. Before the close of the centenary year, the *Istituto* published a commemorative volume, which contained a foreword by Bistolfi, eight essays and a set of sixteen illustrations from the Art Exhibition.[27] In the foreword, Bistolfi recognises the

[26] Part of the text of the 1916 *Proclamation of Independence*, and therefore the founding text of the nation, reads: "The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past."

[27] *An Irish Tribute to Dante: On the 7th Centenary of his Birth* (Istituto Italiano di Cultura: Dublin, 1965). Commemorative publications were not new, and the British 1921 one is a case in point: *Dante: Essays in Commemoration 1321-1921*, eds. A.

"weary indifference" that a reader may feel when faced with yet another Dante publication, but, he says, the reader need not worry as the volume is not a superfluous work, published only to enable the *Istituto* to "take its place in the chorus of praise where some voices may be lyrical, but where too many lack inspiration." He states:

> Ireland has shown that her tribute to the memory of the greatest Christian poet is deeply felt, in the same way as she feels for her faith, which has kept alive in spite of an age of persecution and oppression that failed to subdue it.[28]

These words seek to curry favour with an Irish readership. Once again, the accent is placed upon a Christian Dante, and a Catholic one at that. The Ireland of 1965 was one which resoundingly defined itself in Catholic terms, much to the detriment of other denominations and religions. To be Irish was to be Catholic, or so the dominant forces in society decided. At the heart of Irish society was an overarching hypocrisy and a tendency to explain away evils as the legacy of English rule.[29] Bistolfi mentions the 1921 commemorations and alludes to the ensuing Civil War as one of the reasons which prevented those celebrations from having their proper impact. Bistolfi's foreword makes recourse to that favourite trope that for too long Dante has remained in the hands of the specialised few, and that the time has come to liberate him. In additon, the 1965 celebrations mark, he contends, the "end of a period and show that Dante and his *Comedy* have emerged from the wood of the specialist to play an ever-increasing part in the formation of Irish culture."[30]

The first essay was by Brian Ó Cuív, Professor of Classical Irish Language and Literature at University College Dublin. His essay, "*Coiméide Dhiaga Dante*: Monsignor Pádraig de Brún's Irish Translation of *La Divina Commedia*" was based on a lecture he delivered at the Italian Cultural Institute in 1964 on the occasion of the posthumous conferring of two gold medals on Monsignor de Brún for his translation of the *Commedia* into the Irish

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Cippico, H. E. Goad, E .G. Gardner, W. P. Ker, and W. Seton (London: University of London Press, 1921).

[28] *An Irish Tribute to Dante*, vii.

[29] See Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004); Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper, [1981] 2004).

[30] *An Irish Tribute to Dante*, viii.

language.[31] Ó Cuív notes that this verse translation is by far the longest poem in Irish, and being particularly immersed in the dialect of West Kerry, that his translation of Dante "brings to us much of what he heard beside the hearth in Dunquin."[32] The second essay was by Alice Curtayne, author of the impressive *A Recall to Dante*.[33] In January of 1965 Curtayne delivered a Thomas Davis Lecture for Radio Éireann on Dante, which did much to alert people to the centenary year. The essay, published for the commemorative volume, instead focused on a history of Irish scholarly and translational interest in Dante – "Four Irish Dantists." The four in question considered by Curtayne were Henry Boyd, Father E. O'Donnell, who completed a prose translation of the *Commedia* in 1852,[34] Monsignor Gerard Molloy, who translated those passages of the *Commedia* illustrated by Botticelli, and Rev. John F. Hogan who wrote an excellent book on Dante.[35] Terence de Vere White's essay "Dante in Dublin," originally published in the Italian magazine *Civiltà delle Macchine*, and reproduced in the 1965 commemorative volume, essentially retraces the story of the art competition initiated by the Institute and looks more broadly at how Dante inspires figurative art. The next essay, by Professor E. Byrne Costigan of University College Cork, reproduces a lecture of the same year given by Costigan for the Dante Society in Cork: "Our Lady in the *Divina Commedia*." The essay examines the many examples of Marian influences in Dante, especially St. Bernard. The essay ends with Bernard's prayer to Mary (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, 1-39) in English.

The following two contributions came from Dr Jean Murray, a lecturer in the Department of Italian, University College Dublin: "Recent Developments in Dante Studies" and "Dante and Medieval Irish Visions." The penultimate essay was also from another lecturer at the same institution, David Nolan, whose piece, "Milton and Dante: Satan and the Damned" looked at the poetics of punishment in both poets. The final contribution came from a Franciscan priest, Fr Simon O'Byrne and had as its title "Dante and Franciscanism." Bistolfi in his foreword states that O'Byrne is a

[31] The first full translation of Dante into the English language was by another Irishman Henry Boyd in 1802.
[32] *An Irish Tribute to Dante*, 5.
[33] Alice Curtayne, *A Recall to Dante* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1932).
[34] *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Rev. E. O'Donnell (London: Thomas Richardson, 1852).
[35] John F. Hogan, *The Life and Works of Dante Allighieri. Being an Introduction to the Study of the "Divina Commedia"* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899).

person "specialising in the cultural problems of 'teen-agers'." It goes on:

> The trappings of scholarship may be lacking in the article, but it is published here because the author – as he said in a letter to the Institute – proposes to bring Dante to the attention of younger people, and to create interest and enthusiasm for his poetry. […] In a deeply religious nation, with a strong feeling for the tradition of St. Francis, the topic has great formative value. It opens for the young a road they had not travelled before.[36]

Instead, it treats the topics of a well-traversed terrain without much insight. The essay ends ominously: "Dante, like Chesterton, grasped the real meaning of life and rejoiced at his discovery: Milton and Shaw, narrow and prejudiced, missed the key to the appreciation of the gift of life because they had not the true Faith."[37] The point here was that Chesterton was a Catholic writer, whereas both Milton and Shaw were Protestant. Yet another sectarian point was being scored for a Catholic Dante. While noble in its intentions, the Institute's volume, could not mask the prejudices inherent in 1960s Ireland, and Dante once again was made to fit with these attitudes.

Dante in Ireland and the New Millennium

In 2015 and 2021 two Dante commemorations were celebrated in quick succession. The first of these celebrated the 750th anniversary of Dante's birth, and in Italy it marked the beginning of a cycle of commemorative events and initiatives which culminated in the 2021 celebrations. In Ireland, it allowed organisers to propose a different Dante, one who reflected a transformed, modern Ireland, less embroiled with the politics of national identity. The interim of fifty years since the previous commemoration saw huge cultural, societal and economic change on the island. In the late 1960s the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland became increasingly disaffected, leading to the spilling over of sectarian tensions and the outbreak of violence, which became known as the "Troubles." The Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998 and brought hostilities to an end and ushered in power-sharing mechanisms in the North. It is estimated that over 3,600 people lost their lives over the course of three decades. The 1990s also brought about a sea

[36] *An Irish Tribute to Dante*, x.
[37] *Ibid.*, 128.

change in outlook on the rest of the island. Decades of economic stagnation came to end, as did the Catholic Church's hold over society. Many revelations concerning systemic institutional abuse came to light which further weakened the Church's position. A new optimism prevailed, and this was reflected across culture and society. In terms of Dante commemorations, that same optimism, which embraced diversity, underscored by a new confidence, came to the fore in the many commemorative acts. In collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute, the Departments of Italian in three universities where Dante still prominently featured – Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and University College Cork – came together to offer a series of public lectures on Dante at the Institute over the course of two weeks in June 2015. The cycle of lectures came under the title of *A Dante Quartet*. The first lecture was given by Prof. Corinna Salvadori Lonergan (Trinity College Dublin) on "Dante, Florence and the Florin" (03/06/2015); the second by Prof. John C. Barnes (University College Dublin) on "Guerre convien surgere: Dante and War" (05/06/2015); the third by Prof. Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin (Trinity College Dublin) on "Rivers of Dante (On the Banks of my own Lovely Styx)" (08/06/2015); and myself on "Dante's Disco Inferno: Popular Culture and the *Commedia*" (10/06/2015).

Later that year, the Institute spearheaded another initiative under its Director Renata Sperandio, bringing together various people and institutions for a series of multilingual public readings covering the entire *Commedia*. In conjunction with Friends of the National Gallery, University College Cork and Trinity College Dublin, three days were set aside in three different locations to read the three canticles of Dante's *Commedia*. This collaborative event came under the title of *Ad Astra per Aspera*. The reading of the *Inferno* took place at the National Gallery of Dublin (28/11/2015), and brought together poets, academics and others to read Dante in several languages including Italian, English, German and Spanish. The first canto was read by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, in Irish.[38] The following week University College Cork took up the reins and staged a reading in eleven languages of *Purgatorio* on the four levels of the Glucksman Gallery (04/12/2015). The collaborative readings were rounded off with a reading of *Paradiso*, in nine languages, in the chapel of Trinity

[38] See the *Irish Times* coverage of the event here: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/dante-s-inferno-runs-circles-round-hellish-weather-1.2448185.

College Dublin (11/12/2024). *Paradiso* XXXIII was aptly read by Professor Corinna Salvadori Lonergan, who more than anyone else in Ireland has championed Dante's poetry since the 1960s. These events were reflective of a different Irish embrace of Dante, confident of its own culture and quick to accept diversity and otherness. The languages of the UCC and TCD readings also reflected the diversity of languages spoken and taught in Ireland today.

By 2021 the commemorative modes were very different, with a mixture of both "official" Italian State funded initiatives and more grassroots events, albeit from within the academy. The one major difference between all the 2021 commemorations in Ireland and previous iterations was the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps the single most important commemorative act in Ireland in 2021 was the official inauguration of the Centre for Dante Studies in Ireland (CDSI), at University College Cork. Though conceived many years before, the CDSI was launched early in 2021 to coincide with the annual cycle of public lectures on Dante at UCC. Due to Covid restrictions these lectures were delivered online, and given the fact that they took place early in the year (January to February) they were able to capture a large international audience eager for Dante initiatives. The speakers were Prof. Zygmunt Barański (Univeristy of Notre Dame), "'Di ramo in ramo': Faith and Imagery in *Paradiso* XXIV" (01/02/2021); Prof. Alison Cornish (NYU – President of the Dante Society of America), "Belief in Hell: Breaking Faith in the Circle of Violence (*Inferno* 10 and 13)" (08/02/2021); Prof. Simon Gilson (University of Oxford), "Ingegno in Dante: Ingenuity and Creativity in the *Commedia*" (15/02/2021); Prof. Lino Pertile, (Harvard University), "Luxury and Greed in the *Divine Comedy*" (22/02/2021). The lecture series not only established the CDSI internationally, but also drew attention to Dante's influence in Ireland.

Another initiative of the CDSI was the launch of the online exhibition on Dante Day 2021 (March 25) of the Irish artist Liam Ó Broin's 100 lithographs dedicated to each of the 100 cantos of the *Commedia.* The permanent Online Exhibition *La Commedia Divina* constitutes the first time an Irish artist has attempted to engage with and respond to the entirety of Dante's 100 cantos.[39] The online exhibition was curated by Dario Galassini and myself

[39] https://www.commediadivinaonlinexhibition.com/.
The launch of the exhibition may be viewed on the CDSI's official Youtube page: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42mem3O8TBU.

and done in conjunction with the Office of Public Works. The physical exhibition of the lithographs was housed in Dublin Castle (Coach House Gallery) from September to October when Covid restrictions allowed for it. On September 30 there was also a musical celebration at the gallery with the lithographs framing the backdrop of Irish cellist and composer Elliot Murphy's original piece *Inferno*. The President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins was in attendance.[40]

Throughout the commemorative year the CDSI continued to engage with the public on Dante subjects, especially through its "Dante Dialogues" series which examined themes as diverse as new Dante publications, collecting Dante between archives and libraries,[41] illustrating Dante,[42] translating Dante,[43] appropriating Dante,[44] understanding Dante's life,[45] and uncovering Dante's biography.[46] But perhaps, in the context of Irish commemorations of Dante, the most important Dante Dialogue organised by the CDSI was the final one of the commemorative year: "Irishing Dante," which took place in Cork on December 10, 2021.[47] Over the course of the evening, the guests Dr Kenneth Clarke and Dr Emma Nic Cárthaigh talked eloquently and knowledgeably about the Dantean presence in Ireland, from the visions of the afterlife in early Irish literature predating Dante, to the translations of Boyd and de Brún, to the Dantean presence in Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, Heaney, Carson, O'Donoghue and others. They were joined by the composer Elliot Murphy who spoke of his compositional techniques and how he was so inspired by Dante. The event was rounded off by the spoken word, with the Galician poet Dr Martín Veiga reading from the recently deceased Darío Xohán Caban's Galician translation of Dante. Dr Leyla Livraghi read from Dante's original. Next, attention was turned to modern Irish poets and their appropriation and fascination with Dante. Elsina Caponetti, Dario Galassini and Dr Valentina Mele read cantos XXXII and XXXIII of Dante's *Inferno*, followed by Dr Mary Noonan, a celebrated poet in her own right, who read from her recently deceased partner Matthew Sweeny's version of XXXII ("In the Ice"). Dr Jason

[40] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVfuSCXbWDk.
[41] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFJILGzo0wc.
[42] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJDOw9AX7DA.
[43] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHYaIRSUGAU.
[44] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZAiZKJ0HRY.
[45] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzmPlttZ2X4.
[46] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qYh_8W0owk.
[47] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Umy57UbUN20.

Harris read from Seamus Heaney's "Ugolino," and Dr Kenneth Clark read Bernard O'Donoghue's version of XXXIII ("Fra Alberigo's Bad Fruit"). Next, attention was switched to the Irish language and Dr Emma Nic Cárthaigh read from Criostóir Ó Floinn and Pádraig de Brún's Irish language versions. "Irishing Dante" came to a fitting end with Prof. Corinna Salvadori Lonergan reading *Paradiso* XXXIII in Dante's original.

The Dante to emerge from these late Irish commemorations is a much more complex Dante, multifaceted and diverse, but vernacular all the same. A stronger emphasis is also evident in the performative aspect of the spoken word, and this is something which very much aligns Dante to an Irish poetic culture. Earlier iterations are hardly tenable, pressed as he was into sectarian needs and biases. The Ireland that needed to be counted in 1921 fashioned a Dante in its image, or rather the new image it wanted to portray to the world by casting off its Britishness. By 1965 that image was old and threadbare. The commemorations of 1921 and 2021 could not be more different, but then again, neither are the Irelands which produced them.