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ARTICLE I.

THOMAS AQUINAS.

BY THE LATE REV. RICHARD M. NOTT.

THERE have been men eminent in their own times for theological research and learning, and who wrote on theology with genuine profoundness, but who contributed not much of value, after all, to the progress of discovery in theological truth. They influenced, it may be powerfully, their age, yet not in any vital and profound way the general course of the ages succeeding. The same fact is, of course, true enough of other departments of science, and in the realm of active life as well. Such men are like the solitary peaks in the Mauvaises Terres of Nebraska, lofty and imposing objects, extraordinary features in the peculiar landscape of which they are a part; but they are not like those ranges which are the head-sources of river systems, the controllers of climates and the shaping causes of peculiar civilizations. Yet the biographical histories of such men are often worthy of careful study; as the geologist often finds some of his most interesting opportunities for inquiry among phenomena peculiar to a locality and to a period.

It is, perhaps, not easy to assign to Thomas Aquinas his proper rank as a writer upon theology and contributor to the progress of sacred knowledge. That this monk of six centuries ago had remarkable talents and profound learning, and an intellect trained to the acutest thought by the most severe processes of discipline, is not to be ques-

tioned. That his writings, viewed in the light of the age in which he lived, fully incorporated and expressed his great abilities, can not be questioned. But did his deep studies and investigations, and his vast and learned printed productions, create any thing like an era in the true history of real theological progress? Augustine, Calvin, Wesley—on the other side, Arius, Pelagius, Socinus—are felt in all the speculations, and seen in all the dogmatic aspects of theological thinking to the present day. Is the same true of Aquinas? Was he only an eddy in the river, powerful and influencing a wide circle with mighty local revolutions? or was he a tributary stream, coming in to enlarge the volume and add to the momentum of the main current?

It certainly can not be said that Aquinas was, in any sense, a reformer in religious ideas, or, as to the smallest particular, one of the harbingers of Protestantism. Rather was he a veritable incarnation of conservatism. Although of a rarely speculative intellectual tendency, he was absorbed exclusively in the maintenance and scientific unfolding of Roman Catholic theology as it was. If any thing new was propounded by him in dogma it was, so far as I can learn, only that somewhat obscure hint or two which afterward furnished the theoretical basis for the doctrine—so influential in its practical effects—of indulgences. He magnificently defended great truths, but bent his energies with equal force and determination—no doubt moved by as sincere convictions—to complete the defensive circumvallation of all the vast errors that had been propagated through patristic tradition and ratified by councils and bulls. If not a contributor to reformed ideas, neither was he, like Augustine and Calvin, an originator of comprehensive and fundamental theories in theology. Therefore while, as there is some reason to declare, the praise properly belongs to him of having been almost the discoverer, certainly the first complete architect of *system* in theology, and of having done a great and even extraordinary work in that respect, he did not make himself the perma-

nent head of any special and enduring school of theoretical theology.

He may then reasonably be described as a brilliant theological light—a light, too, which concentrated with powerful effect into one focus a multitude of rays derived from many sources of previous illumination, and a light seen conspicuously still by those who are carrying explorations back into the history of theology; but not as a luminary which lighted up large tracts of theological knowledge, or cast penetrating beams onward in such a manner as to guide later inquirers into original discoveries of truth.

If his work as a metaphysician were to be considered—and a very keen metaphysician he undeniably was—it were almost enough to remind ourselves that he was of that school in philosophy called the scholastic. It was not in harmony with the genius of that system to make independent search into the primary and radical questions of metaphysics. Scholasticism was not so much a system of philosophy as an application of it. Its aim—first accepting the philosophical principles of Aristotle—was to make theology appear philosophical. There was but one fundamental and purely abstract subject in metaphysics which was debated earnestly in the Middle Ages, that was the question of universals—coming under the head of nominalism on the one hand, and realism on the other. This contest, indeed, raged hotly, dividing the learned world into violent parties. Yet even this controversy had little pure abstract interest comparatively, but was waged chiefly on account of its relations with theology.

It is interesting to discover that the Roman Catholic estimate of Aquinas, both as a philosopher and as a theologian, is vastly more exalted than that just now suggested. In fact, the estimate of him by the leading authorities in that Church may be said to be literally almost the highest at which a finite thinker can be rated. If eulogy can surpass the panegyrics bestowed by popes, doctors, historians, and biographers on the "Angel of the Schools," as Aqui-