The reception of Dante represents an increasingly vast and formidable area of research. Alongside the endlessly varied creative and intellectual responses to his writing and its innumerable adaptations and translations, Dante has served—arguably more than any other European author—as a political icon of extraordinary flexibility, both within the Italian peninsula and beyond. Fulvio Conti, a professor of contemporary history at the University of Florence, offers here a richly documented longitudinal account of some of the key public and political uses of Dante in modern Italy. His monograph was first published in Italian by Carocci to coincide with the seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante's death in 2021 (Il sommo italiano: Dante e l'identità della nazione). Now translated into English by Patrick John Barr for Routledge, the book traces “the almost morbid interest that Dante has generated for over two hundred years in the public sphere” (p. 1). The book's two hundred pages cover an enormous amount of ground: it begins with the revival of interest in Dante in the late eighteenth century and concludes on the eve of the 2021 centenary. The study aims to “offer a reconstruction of this unique story and examine the reasons behind it” (p. 1) and provides an overarching resource to those interested in this rich seam of the poet's reception: “an instrument with which to navigate the meanders of this long and fascinating journey” (p. 7).

Reflecting Conti's background as a historian of the social and political history of modern Italy rather than a Dante scholar, the book constitutes an accomplished and meticulously researched piece of historical writing rather than an exercise in literary or cultural criticism. It offers a narrative account of the myriad uses of Dante during the periods in question and how he has been accommodated by different projects and ideologies, while focusing less, for example, on how specific aspects of Dante's work have been used and repurposed, or on the dynamics of the poet's literary
and cultural afterlife. A short introduction takes leave from the seminal work of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Ernst Gellner, on the constructed and contingent reality of nations and nationalisms, and Alberto Mario Banti, on the place of culture in the nation-building processes of the Risorgimento. Conti rightly highlights here Dante’s exceptional versatility as a national icon. This pre-national poet, Conti argues, has served as a “polysemous symbol; a benchmark for assorted value systems resulting in his being claimed and vaunted by a variety of different social and political groups” (p. 3). Hereafter, the book gathers and unearths a fascinating series of case studies and vignettes—some of them familiar to scholars of the field, others novel and surprising—and pieces them together to chart some of the oscillations in the poet’s public fortuna. The many passages and examples provided are typically allowed to speak for themselves: texts are quoted in English translation, and the particular rhetoric surrounding Dante tends not to be closely interrogated. Such an approach, however, allows Conti to move swiftly and efficiently through the many areas under consideration.

The first of the five main chapters addresses “The Romantics’ Dante” and traces the burgeoning interest in the poet in the century prior to Italian unification, following a century in which there had been relatively little enthusiasm for him. The story of Dante’s cultural renaissance, and how it became entwined the political movements of the Risorgimento, is a familiar one, but is traced here effectively and economically. Protagonists in the recuperation of Dante as a cultural and political icon are addressed in turn (Vittorio Alfieri, Vincenzo Monti, Ugo Foscolo, Giuseppe Mazzini), as are the different strains of his political reception, from “neo-Guelph” Catholics to the “neo-Ghibelline” secularists who espoused the anti-papal aspects of his works. The chapter ends with the debates surrounding how to commemorate the exiled Dante in Florence; the rediscovery of Dante’s portrait in the Bargello; and a renewed interest in Ravenna, home to Dante’s human remains, as a site of secular pilgrimage. The chapter offers a concise overview of the processes that led to Dante’s centrality in the iconography of the new nation by the time of unification in 1861 and serves mostly as essential context for what follows in subsequent chapters. It would serve students well as a focused introduction to the emergence and development of the Risorgimento cult of Dante.

Following the broad chronological range of the opening chapter, the second chapter focuses on the iconic celebrations of the sixth centenary of Dante’s birth in 1865. While the 1821 centenary of Dante’s death passed “almost unnoticed” (p. 39), the 1865 anniversary occurred in the context of the new Kingdom of Italy, whose capital had recently passed from Turin to Florence. Accordingly, the city’s ardent celebrations combined literary commemoration with a powerful new sense of national consciousness, as Dante became consecrated as poet and icon of the new nation. The chapter contextualizes the 1865 celebrations by approaching them in light of the more neglected centenary of Galileo’s birth in Pisa one year earlier—a “trial run” for the Dante centenary at both an organizational and an ideological level. Conti carefully reconstructs the Florentine celebrations, before exploring those in Ravenna (following the fortuitous rediscovery of a cask containing Dante’s bones) and other local initiatives around the peninsula. These included events in the “unredeemed” cities of the Triveneto, still under Austrian rule, where the veneration of Dante took on a subversive and even more intensely political dimension.

Chapter 3, “Dantemania’ in the Age of Liberalism,” offers a compelling account of the cult of Dante in the first decades of the new nation. Conti charts the rapid expansion of Dante studies in Italian universities, the establishment of Dante societies and organizations, the proliferation of cultural responses to the poet (including early cine-
matic productions), and the role of public monuments. Particular attention is paid here to the statue in Trento (recently subjected to a monographic study by Anna Pegoretti), which became an especially potent site of resistance to Austrian rule and focus of irredentist sentiment, and to the highly politicized debates surrounding the renovation of Dante’s tomb in Ravenna. Especially interesting (and more neglected in previous scholarship) is the backlash against “Dante monotheism” among some intellectuals at the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1903, one eminent Dante scholar, Rodolfo Renier, even described a nation afflicted by “Dantitis.” The place of Dante in the civic religion of the new nation has been well documented, but Conti’s account of the discomfort that accompanied what was often an obsessive focus on the poet is one of the most revealing and original aspects of the chapter.

The most extreme and ideological appropriation of Dante took place under the fascist regime. “Fascism’s Dantean Cult” is the title of Conti’s fourth chapter, though a significant part of the chapter in fact concerns the use of Dante on the eve of the regime, especially in the patriotic mobilization of Italians during World War I and in the commemoration of the sixth centenary of Dante’s death in 1921. An intriguing aspect of this centenary is the militaristic commemoration of 1289 Battle of Campaldino, celebrated as a kind of precursor to the 1918 Battle of Vittorio Veneto. By this time, meanwhile, the Catholic Church had fully embraced the poet, having been wary of his association with neo-Ghibelline movements during the Risorgimento. 1921 saw Ravenna become a fraught site of ideological and even physical conflict between different political factions—nationalist, republican, socialist, fascist—all eager to claim the poet’s legacy. The march on Ravenna by around three thousand fascists to honor Dante in September 1921, led by Italo Balbo, darkly foreshadowed the fateful march on Rome two years later. Perhaps surprisingly, only about ten pages are dedicated to the use of Dante under the regime itself. Dante’s remains were subjected to a renewed anthropological interest and the poet became celebrated in newly racialized terms, as “the most glorious and authentic representative of the Mediterranean race” (p. 135). He was subjected to ever more strained ideological interpretations, which read Mussolini into the Commedia’s political prophecies, while the regime instituted a Dante Festival in 1932 and subsidized public railfares to Ravenna. The apex of what Conti describes as fascism’s “secular canonization of Dante” came in the plans for a Dante-themed modernist “temple,” the Danteum, to be constructed alongside the Roman Forum, drawing allegorical connections between Dante, Roman Empire, and the regime. After the plans were welcomed by Mussolini in 1938, the initiative was halted by the coming of war. Nonetheless, Conti writes, the abandoned project “remains not only as testimony to the visionary capacities of the two architects [Giuseppe Terragni and Pietro Lingeri] but also to Italian Fascism’s complete appropriation of Dante, who was now perceived as the sacred symbol of that regime” (p. 142).

Conti’s final chapter, “From Italian Symbol to Global Icon,” first emphasizes the move from a heavily nationalist Dante to a universalist vision of the poet, in the context of the post-fascist Italian Republic and a new age of global multilateralism. While Dante remained a symbol of the nation, as documented here in the ongoing use of Dante in commemorative stamps and banknotes in postwar Italy, he was now “shorn of the faith-based fetishism that had characterized the previous century and a half” (p. 151). Valuable here is Conti’s account of the 1965 centenary, a key moment in Dante’s journey from “national icon to universal symbol” (p. 156). As an emblematic example of this process, the occasion even saw Dante commemorated by UNESCO, while Conti recounts events celebrating Dante from the United States to Costa Rica. Alongside this process of “universalization,” Conti traces some key aspects of Dante’s “popularization”: his place in pop culture and
mass media, both in Italy and beyond. The material presented here is always intriguing, though the focus on the question of national identity becomes a little less sharp than elsewhere. This changes in the final pages of the chapter, which offer some reflections on Dante’s place in contemporary public discourse, and especially the success of Roberto Benigni’s “Tutto Dante” performances. With the institution of a dedicated “Dantedì” in 2019, the remarkable breadth of celebrations to mark the seventh centenary of Dante’s death in 2021, and the fraught political debates in 2023 surrounding the poet’s true political legacy, there is little sign that the phenomenon traced in the monograph will abate any time soon.

Alongside Guy Raffa’s recent book Dante’s Bones (2021), which uses the history of Dante’s human remains to tell the story of the poet’s cultural and political legacy in Italy, Conti offers researchers and students a concise but detailed roadmap for exploring 230 years of Dante as an Italian national icon. Key areas of focus in the book are the centennial years of 1865, 1921, and 1965. These not only serve as focal points for public commemoration of Dante but also, in their spacing, illustrate powerfully some of the political and ideological tensions associated with very different moments in the history of modern Italy. I would have been interested to read more about the place of Dante in the resistance to Fascism and his place in Italian schooling, though I of course appreciate that no book covering two centuries of Dantean reception in only two hundred pages can be comprehensive in its coverage. The recent appropriation of Dante by politicians such as Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, too, shows the limits of an account that presents the “national” Dante as superseded by a “global” or “universal” Dante. If the postwar period was indeed associated with a rejection of nationalism and a new era of universalism and international cooperation, the last decade, not least in Italy, has witnessed a notable hardening of national identities, and it would have been interesting to consider Dante’s place in contemporary nationalist discourse. A conclusion or afterword would also have been welcome in connecting the book’s findings to some of the broader questions of nation, culture, and politics raised briefly in the introduction. Nonetheless, this book is a valuable resource for those interested in charting the wider course of Dante’s extraordinary public and political afterlife in Italy and will serve as a platform and key reference work for those delving deeper into its many phases and aspects.