

HISTORY EXTENSION

Who Is The Historian?

The question of who should write history has consistently been debated and challenged throughout history. The idea that history should be written by the elite was previously agreed upon as it was the elite who were to ultimately be reading and studying these said histories. However, such beliefs changed when people such as the Annales began to write their own histories for their own audiences and history itself became a universal subject with the help of Ranke.

Leopold von Ranke was an influential German historian and educator who is frequently considered as one of the founders of modern source-based history. He, according to Warren, “he not only came up with a new historical technique based on rigid objectivity but also single-handedly created the history profession ...” Ranke’s scholarly method and way of teaching had a great influence on Western historiography and it was in his preface to his work that he stated his often quoted dictum: that he was writing history *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – as it happened.

Ranke was born on the 21st December 1795 in the small town of Wiehe in Thuringia, Germany into an old Lutheran theologian family. During this time, Germany was not a nation-state but was a loose grouping of over three hundred separate states which owed allegiance on paper to the Holy Roman Emperor and in particular, Thuringia, was a part of the Kingdom of Saxony but was awarded to Prussia by the peace terms of 1815 at the close of the Napoleonic wars. He wanted history to be a universal and scientific subject that would spread throughout schools so that everybody and not just ‘gentlemen’ could both study it and record it.

Ranke was influenced by his deeply-felt Lutheran religious beliefs and after attending the famous Pforta private school and the renowned Protestant boarding school of Schulpforta, attended the University of Leipzig in 1814 to study Theology and Philology; he never completed his theological studies because he objected to the university faculty’s cool, rationalistic approach to faith. This religious belief linked with strands in German Idealist philosophy, particularly to the work of Fichte. Between 1817 and 1825, Ranke worked as a schoolmaster teaching Greek and Roman classics at the Gymnasium in Frankfurt an der Oder; this post being one held within the Prussian system. It was only whilst employed as a schoolmaster at Frankfurt that he began to consider attempting to become seriously involved in historical studies initially with the view to improving his knowledge of the Classical ages in order to be a better teacher.

Ranke wrote his first book, History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations 1494-1514, in 1824 which included an appended section entitled “critique of modern historical writing” that presented a convincing criticism of contemporary historiography condemning its reliance on tradition and proposed, instead, Ranke’s own more objective method. Ranke’s aim was to reconstruct the unique periods of the past as they actually were and to avoid injecting the history of former times with the spirit of the present – historicism. He intended that his method would be applicable to modern history as Barthold Niebuhr had done a scientific method of historical investigation to ancient history.

Following this, Leopold von Ranke was rewarded with a supernumerary professorship at the University of Berlin that initiated what were to become more than fifty years of association between Ranke and that University. He was able to publish more of his works such as the Historisch-Politische Zeitschrift journal which was used to attack the ideas of Liberalism and the multi-volume History of the Popes, their Church and State in the sixteen and seventeenth centuries. In this, Ranke was able to explain the history of the Papacy in the 16th century. He has been generally praised by historians for placing the situation of the Catholic Church in the context of the 16th century and for his treatment of the complex interaction of the political and religious issues in the 16th century. In particular, the British Catholic historian, Lord Acton, defended Ranke’s book as the most fair-minded, balanced and objective study ever written on the 16th century Papacy.

Ranke followed this book with the multi-volume History of the Reformation in Germany in 1845-1847. Ranke used the ninety-six volumes from ambassadors at Imperial Diet in Frankfurt to explain the Reformation in Germany as the result of both politics and religion. He was awarded the security, and a much enhanced salary of a full professorship in Berlin in 1837 and was appointed as Prussian historiographer by King Frederick William IV in 1841. Leopold von Ranke died in May, 1886 at the age of 91; the last ten years of his life having been given over to his nine-volumed Universal History.

Although Ranke favoured objectivity, like every other historian, subjectivity was undeniable. This is so because whether the historian likes it or not, their own personal, social and political context would seep into their works.

Ranke perhaps saw it necessary to that a historian should be as impersonal from his writing as possible and write it 'as it happened' because, as a child of the Enlightenment, saw history as a scientific subject and therefore possible to extract the 'truth' from the past.

However, his Lutheran background and position as a monarchist proved him wrong. These ideas were prevalent throughout his works as he declared to reveal what was at God's hand. He made various spiritual contributions throughout his work. Ranke's deeply religious Lutheran beliefs influenced him to believe that God could not be "pigeon-holed" and that his presence could be found in past and present events: "In all history, God dwells, lives and is to be found".

His strong monarchist background also affected him as most of his books were written about politics and militaristic affairs. Ranke wrote about transnational and political history which not only covered the bigger powers such as Germany, England and France, but also included smaller states such as Serbia and Belgium. Although he branched out in terms of a variety of countries, he still primarily focused on analysing the complex religious and political systems of Europe. But again, although he was diverse in terms of geography, Ranke was not broad in terms of social class. His upper class background inclined him to focus on political events and individuals as he considered them significant and thus, lower classes were overlooked.

Every historian's content has been unconsciously, or consciously, influenced by their context. Their own beliefs about history and what they aim to extract from it is also influenced by their own personal lives and upbringings. Even Herodotus, the 'father of history', was subjugated to bias through his constant reference to his own opinions through the word 'I' in much of his process and histories. Post-modernist Derrida claims that the 'absolute truth' is virtually impossible and historians end up interpreting and reinterpreting the same narrative. However, the importance of such interpretations has been echoed by Elton as he sees that it is through these that we are able to understand history because history is virtually a human-subject and it is therefore logical for humans to be the ones to record it and ultimately deduce it on their own terms. Tuchman states that, "without an opinion, a historian would be a ticking clock and unreadable". Becker also supports Elton's view, stating that "the actual event contributes something to the imagined picture; but in the mind that holds the picture always contributes something too".

Sir Geoffrey Rudolph Elton was a British historian of the Tudor period. He made very significant contributions to the then –current debate on the philosophy of historical practice, as well as having a powerful effect on the profession through, among other things, his presidency of the Royal Historical Society. Elton was not a determinist and believed in the 'objective truth'. Although at first he defied traditional views, his life experiences, teachings and lessons skewed them to an orthodox approach.

Geoffrey Rudolph Elton was born in Tübingen, Germany, on 17 August, 1921, as Gottfried Rudolf Ehrenberg. He was born to the scholars Victor Ehrenberg and Eva Dorothea Sommer. In 1929, the Ehrenbergs moved to Prague, Czech Republic and in February 1939, to Britain. It was here that he would spend the remainder of his life as an English refugee and later, naturalised citizen. He continued his education at Rydal School, a Methodist school in Wales. After only two years, Ehrenberg was working as a teacher at Rydal and achieved the position of assistant master in

Mathematics, History and German. He earned an external London degree with University Correspondence College, Cambridge, in 1943 and went to Cambridge in 1949, advancing to a Clare College fellowship in 1954. During this time, he spent some time in the Army and anglicising his name to Geoffrey Elton.

He was knighted in 1986 and served as the Regius Professor of Modern History in 1983-88.

Elton was a defender of traditional, scholarly narrative history, much to the demise of other historians. He focused primarily on the life of Henry VIII but made significant contributions to the study of Queen Elizabeth I. He was most famous for arguing in his 1953 book The Tudor Revolution in Government that Thomas Cromwell was the author of modern, bureaucratic government which replaced medieval, household government. Elton's conservative approach is much admired in his profession and possibly occurred as a result of his involvement in World War II. In The Practice of History, Elton stated that if an event can be known, "that is all that is required to make it a 'fact of history'".

Elton saw history as a circular progression and believed in the use of narratives to transcend the barrier of time. He believes that the 'cure' for the inevitable difficulties facing historians over the partial nature of evidence and allegation of subjectivity lie in the proper practice of scholarship and research. This belief resulted in the famous

Carr-Elton debate when he defended the nineteenth century interpretation of empirical, 'scientific' history most famously associated with Ranke against Carr's views. Carr, a post-modernist believed history is all one big grand-narrative. Elton, on the other hand, was a strong defender of the traditional methods of history and was appalled by postmodernism, once intoning on the subject "... we are fighting for the lives of innocent young people beset by devilish tempters who claim to offer higher forms of thought and deeper truths and insights".

History is a complex discourse and historians attempt to decipher and interpret it in the way that they best see fit. These methods and practises have been thoroughly and subconsciously affected by their own political, social or economic context and whether they add something or weaken their writings of history, is debatable. Ranke and Elton are perfect examples of historians who have defined or redefined history. They, through their influences and by their influence, contributed different perspectives on history and helped to make history a universal subject that is both scientific and important to an individual's identity.