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Leopold Von Ranke and the Von Ranke Library

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The
Ernest S. Bird Library
Dedication Issue

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Leopold Von Ranke and the Von Ranke Library

by Jeremy C. Jackson

If a man perform that which hath not been attempted before; or attempted and given over; or hath been achieved, but not with so good circumstance; he shall purchase more honor than by effecting a matter of greater difficulty or virtue, wherein he is but a follower.

In a remarkably accurate way, these words of Francis Bacon from his essay, “Of Honor and Reputation,” stand as a sober epitaph to the achievement of Leopold von Ranke. For, alike praised or criticized for what he was not, he has less often been appreciated for what he was — in the words of that stern critic, Lord Acton, not only the writer of “a larger number of mostly excellent books than any other historian” but also the master of method who “showed how it could be done.” A fair judgment in 1886, G.P. Gooch, standing in the same tradition of shrewd, sometimes ungenerous, English criticism,¹ could echo it in 1950 as equally “unchallengeable” then.

Certainly, it cannot be said that Ranke was the first historian to use sources critically, to perform what had “not been attempted before” — Mabillon, in the late 17th century, was there ahead of him. But this attempt had virtually been “given over” in that following age which saw the broad philosophic histories of Voltaire and Gibbon. Nor may it be denied that Ranke enjoyed the “good circumstance” of a training in classical philology. This placed him in the mainstream of a century which delighted in verification and gave him, in a milieu of Prussian historians writing regime-serving text-books, an intellectual allegiance which was never outweighed by patriotic sentiment, even in his middle and later years when his history of the Hohenzollerns would betray a teleological flavor. Of course, already, B.G. Niebuhr had demonstrated how to apply philology to classical history in 1811 when Ranke was a mere adolescent. But for young Ranke in his twenties to tuck the method under his arm and flee the Constantinople of classical

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¹ As we know from the Ranke-Graves letters, purchased by the library in 1965, the only country whose scholars did not celebrate Ranke’s ennoblement in 1859 was England. Ranke married an antecedent of Robert Graves, incidentally.



Leopold von Ranke. The portrait, by H.G. Herrmann after J. Schrader, Berlin, 1883, hangs in the George Arents Research Library

and biblical studies for the Italy of early modern European history was a significant breaching of the walls. And perhaps this particular analogy is not without further usefulness. For avowedly, the Renaissance was not caused by the Fall of Constantinople, yet the accession of manuscripts stimulated the continuing work of the humanists; avowedly, too, Ranke was no Valla, Vico or Voltaire, yet the stimulus of his books and teaching on the work of two generations of European historians who performed a greater quantity of substantial scholarly labor than any generations before or since can hardly be ignored.

Nevertheless, in matters “of greater difficulty or virtue” he was “but a follower.” He was not a pioneer in the history of thought; he did not, as Gooch, again, would have put it, “solve the riddle of the Muse.” Though acutely conscious of epistemological issues, he never concertedly addressed himself to them. Falsely accused, or praised, as a founder of the positivist, historicist approach, he was in fact, as Noel Annan has written, perfectly aware that some facts are more “important” than others and uniquely free of that positivist vice of judging the past. Condemned to a trickle of citations in Collingwood’s *The Idea of History*, itself an apocalyptic tract hailing the millenium of Benedetto Croce, Ranke deserved more and differently of the historian whose death in 1943 took place within a stone’s throw of where Ranke himself had been married exactly 100 years earlier, on the shores of Lake Windermere.

He was in his method and ideas a follower rather than an innovator – even the famed seminar was borrowed from the academic tradition of the philologists – and so merited on these scores no important place in Collingwood’s book. Collingwood might have pondered more, however, the quality of Ranke’s *oeuvre*. If his own scholarly output declined in value as he strove to adapt his research to the procrustean bed of a favorite argument, Ranke’s retained its quality to the end. As Von Laue has remarked,² there was a fundamental stability of thought and character about Ranke which enabled him to do justice to the past. “I rest satisfied in my Lord,” he wrote his brother in 1827; and, though too much of an individualist to be a strictly orthodox Lutheran, this bedrock spiritual and intellectual conviction spawned the temerity to confront and reveal the past “as it really was,” to quote that most famous phrase in his very first book.

In an age increasingly in retreat from the values that undergird what the philosopher would call the subject-object relationship, that give concrete meaning to the individual and to each unique event, that have fed, in other words, that peculiarly Western intellectual preoccupation with history, it is hardly surprising that the work of Ranke, which is the most fitting monument to this tradition, should be held at a discount. Whether the small revival in Ranke studies of late – in Germany the ebb and flow of such studies follows its own peculiar rules – presages a reaction to prevailing trends, remains to be seen. Two American publishers this year, for example, promised volumes of Ranke extracts. Whether this fact is of greater commercial than historiographical interest is an open question. At least, the lengthening gap between our days and those of the Nazis must also be taken into account. This aside, there may be a connection between a revival of interest in Ranke and a revived respect for historicism, considered in its non-pejorative sense. But if this be the case, the Ranke revival may be a brief

²Theodore von Laue, author of *Leopold Ranke, The Formative Years*, Princeton University Press, 1950.

one, for it would be based on a slight misconception of his own convictions. The man who saw the shadow of God cast across the passing ages is not a natural bedfellow for the 20th century historicist, even if this shadow can be interpreted as paralleling the universals that the structuralists (cousins of the historicists?) seek.

These matters, however, should not keep us any longer from discussing Ranke in relation to his library. Overwhelming in their very number and variety, his books remind one that there was never a great historian without great erudition. Alongside imagination and intellectual integrity, erudition completes the trinity of virtues essential to the writing of good history. Ranke's erudition is legendary, of course, but his writings illustrate the other two virtues equally well. What better sign of this Lutheran's integrity than his miraculously impartial *History of the Popes*? As for his imagination, consider this timeless evocation of Swiss mercenaries: "brave against iron, cowards against gold."

In Ranke's library, indeed – and this is one of the least appreciated values of the collection – a first-class opportunity is presented of gauging for oneself the stature of the man. After working almost daily in the collection in the spring of 1971, going over each volume consecutively, I developed a "feel" for Ranke which has mostly been confirmed by what I have read about him since. And this is hardly surprising, for a library is a personal affair. My experience is echoed in a letter of the eminent historian of Germany, Koppel S. Pinson, who visited the collection in 1956 and subsequently wrote the Curator of Special Collections, Lester G. Wells, as follows: "I think you have done very wisely in keeping this collection intact. It gives you a concrete feel of the scope of interest and vast erudition of this master historian that cannot be gotten from any biographical publication."

A few months later, anticipating a visit to the Ranke Library, Felix Hirsch, the well-known book scholar, wrote Dean of the Library School and Librarian Wayne Yenawine: "For many years I harbored the wish to see the Ranke collection in your library. I grew up in the tradition of Ranke's historical methods and tendencies; I would be thrilled to see his books that are now under your care." Meanwhile, a year before, Professor Walter Simon of Cornell had received permission to bring his graduate students over to browse around the books. This salutary academic ancestor worship also has its devotees at Syracuse. In the past year, several faculty members took classes up to 307 Carnegie, the home of the collection until the move to the new building. Professor Fred Marquardt, with the kind permission of the Rare Book Room staff, even conducted a class in the Arents Room itself, seated at Ranke's great desk, beneath his imposing portrait, protected from any contempt for his subject-matter by the battery of Ranke's collected works, deployed in front of him.

More seriously, apart from producing a sense of respect for a great scholar, browsing around the Ranke Library is an excellent introduction to

the scholarly tradition in which Ranke was steeped, a tradition which we have already identified as that specially Western *historical* tradition. A list of the separate great source collections owned by Ranke, which have opened so many doors to the past, would be tedious. But anyone at Syracuse with serious interests in European history and literature has reason to be grateful for such treasures as Muratori's *Scriptores*, Mansi's *Sacrorum conciliorum*, the *Corpus inscriptionum latinorum*, the works of the Maurist fathers and, however incomplete, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. With such valuable sources, one is not surprised to find a letter in the Ranke Library correspondence file from Professor Milton Anastos of Harvard's Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, pleading with Library Director Wharton Miller in 1950 to sell the Mansi. He says that he needs it desperately, is forced always to consult copies elsewhere and will gladly pay the market price, quoting figures in the \$2,000 range. Miller jotted on the letter: "Refused over telephone. . . . Can't sell him Ranke gift." He was alluding, of course, to the inalienability clause covering the purchase in 1887.

Apart from the great document series, the collection also has extensive memoir holdings which remind one that Ranke placed heavy stress upon the personal opinions of contemporaries. Over and over again in his books he compares and contrasts different accounts of the same events, sifting them for value. It is therefore not surprising to find shelf upon shelf of irreplaceable, often originally imprinted or handwritten, pamphlets, memoirs, and reports. The Venetian *relazioni* are, naturally, the best known, a critical catalog to the first hundred having been edited by three Syracuse scholars in 1952 and published by the University Press. No less important, however, are the French political pamphlets spanning the century up to the start of Louis XIV's personal rule in 1661 and then leaping forward to the Revolutionary years. In addition, there are several of the great French memoir collections, pride of place going to Petitot's 78-volume colossus, and volume upon volume of loosely edited or unedited memoirs and pamphlets in all fields, some bound by collectors in the 19th century, others (to my mind the least exploited and least known part of the collection) in the 17th and 18th centuries. In this last category fall such omnibus works as Anton Busching's 23-volume *Magazin für die Neue Historie und Geographie* (Halle: 1779-93), with fascinating pieces on all sorts of arcane topics.

Mention of the arcane does prompt the remark that while Ranke gathered books for a purpose, he also, like lesser mortals, "picked things up" which were only tangential to his research or sometimes not germane at all. Mrs. Barbauld's *Lessons for Children* (new ed., 1841) may indeed have been his wife's contribution, not his. And considering his relative lack of interest in American history, the chief value of a *History of Lexington, Kentucky* (1872) would have to be the note on the inside cover: "To Dr. Leopold Ranke from his American kinsman the author Geo. W. Ranck, Lexington Kentucky, U.S.A. Nov. 30, 1872." Whether George Ranck was really a

kinsman I do not at present know. Compared to the works of his German "cousin," certainly, his *History of Lexington, Kentucky* was undoubtedly an "unconsidered trifle." Rather weightier on an adjacent shelf rest the 17 volumes of Adrien Baillet's *Jugemens des Savans sur les principaux ouvrages des auteurs* (new ed., 1725-35), a critic's harvest, surely.

For each work I happen to have mentioned there are a dozen, a hundred or a thousand more to be enjoyed. Compared to one of the great public or university libraries, obviously, Ranke's is not a huge collection. But listen to what could be said of it in 1943, in comparison with other New York State libraries. (Clearly, a shift in relative strength of such libraries has taken place since 1943 – but, then, Ranke was no longer around.) Dr. Stieg, librarian of Hamilton, then compiling *A Union List of Collections of Source Material on European History in New York State Libraries*, wrote Library Director Miller: "Syracuse stacks up very well on holdings and ranks with Cornell, NYU and even Columbia. Rochester University and the Grosvenor (in Buffalo) have practically nothing. And European history is not supposed to be one of Syracuse's specialties!" (The pedagogical moral is obvious.) Miller's jotted comment was: "Almost all of the Syracuse holdings to which Stieg refers are from the Von Ranke Library." I need hardly belabor the point, therefore, that, whatever rumors may say to the contrary, the Ranke library is an immensely worthwhile collection. As Wiedemann, Ranke's amanuensis, wrote, it has great value as the sum of the book acquisitions of a superb intellect and scholar who was conscious not only of his own research and reference needs but also of the necessity of introducing his graduate students to the basic works in history. The Ranke library can more and more be the place where, students and teachers alike in history and the cognate fields, we can cut our teeth and realize more acutely than before the depths of our ignorance and the shallowness of our preparation.

All this being said, how must one react to a thoughtful and by no means scurrilous editorial in *The Daily Orange*, February 11, 1972, which began with the statement, "When the von Ranke Library was donated to Syracuse University in the last century, it should have been refused. To say that Syracuse does not deserve the collection is to miss the point; our university accepted a collection which it could not and would not maintain."³

For the sake of accuracy, it has to be pointed out that this is not exactly how the collection came to Syracuse. For anyone who has studied the various accounts of its acquisition, it is clear that Syracuse very actively

³The general context of this editorial was that the John Ben Snow Foundation's generous gift of \$100,000 for the Ranke library (1971) had been devoted not to the restoration and extra cataloging of the collection but to its material housing on the sixth floor of the new Bird Library. This use of the gift was with the express permission of the donor, of course, but there had been discussion as to whether this was the best way in which the money could be used.

Sept. 9 Oct. 15.

(3)

For some time I have been thinking of writing to you
but it will be difficult to do so in the present
circumstances. I have been very busy with my
work in the library. I have been very busy with my
work in the library.

We are here in the hotel
of Europe. Our journey was rather pleasant,
we had with us an old monarchical & religious
& a young republican & a new occupied
of the great quarrel of the world in our baggage.
We have been very well received: we worked
yesterday twice in the archive, & after a first success
but we had ^{at times} discovery of very interesting pieces. Your
visit is as kind & pleasant as you know him to be,
talking, laughing, & working we pass the day;
a pity that you not are with us.

I hope you & our Otto are well, God bless you,
dear wife: very often we speak of you: no moment,
but I do not think of you: let me know good news, —
in life & death yours
Ranke

A letter from von Ranke to his Irish wife, Clara Graves, 1845.
From the Von Ranke Collection in the Rare Book Department of the Library.

sought it through the agency of its first Librarian-cum-History professor Dr. Charles Wesley Bennett who, though a professor at Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois when the purchase was finally effected, still served as the intermediary because of his original contacts in Berlin. In other words, Syracuse cannot be considered as passive recipient unless one is to deny an institution's responsibility for the actions of its own agent. Furthermore, although the editorial goes on to suggest that the collection was seen purely as a prestige item, this also is an indefensible statement. Neither Bennett, a pupil of Ranke, 1866-69, who first had the vision of trying to obtain his teacher's library in 1875, nor Dr. John Morrison Reid, former president of Syracuse's parent institution Genesee College and then president of the new university's Board of Trustees, who provided the money, looked at it this way. Obviously, it did lend prestige to a fledgling institution; and, considering that several American universities – Harvard among them, it was rumored – had been beaten to the post by Syracuse, Bennett and Reid could hardly have been unhappy about the coup. But Bennett and Reid's stated intention was to obtain the library as the nucleus for a scholarly research collection.

Bennett expressed this most tellingly in the text of an address he prepared for the dedication of the "New Library," now the Administration Building, in June, 1889. He recalled how he had said to Reid in 1875, "When Leopold von Ranke dies you must purchase his library for the historical department of Syracuse University. Then let the professors in each of the departments find friends to make like purchases for them, and Syracuse will be the best furnished institution of the land for original and scholarly work."

Certainly, the University was fortunate in having someone like Bennett as its agent, a man of unusual drive and initiative. In deference to the other "professors in each of the departments," furthermore, it must be conceded that Bennett did have presented to him a concrete opportunity for which he had not had to search. Nevertheless, the story of his enterprise, fueled by his awareness that the University desperately needed books, remains impressive.

Bound for Europe anyway in the spring of 1886, when Ranke died, Bennett soon guessed that his Berlin contacts might well destroy his chances of obtaining the library through over-obsequious regard for the grief of the family of the deceased. So, taking the bull by the horns, he went to Berlin and extracted a firm promise from Ranke's son, Otto, that in the unlikely event that the Prussian government should not buy the collection, it would go to Syracuse by default. To Otto's growing dismay, as the fall of 1886 gave way to winter, it became apparent that through the stubbornness of the Finance Minister, Von Scholz, no transaction paying suitable honor to his father's name and suitable money to the family could be completed. At this crucial juncture, Bennett played his psychological trump card by telling Otto that Syracuse would give him all he wanted, per agreement, until April 1, and after that nothing. For Otto, this represented an immediate escape from humiliation that could hardly be refused – at least *someone* still appreciated

the value of the product. I think, too, that it is hard to imagine Otto's not having savored the opportunity – even if, patriotically, he might regret it later – of “punishing” the government by making its refusal to purchase the occasion for the departure from the fatherland of the books of the man whom the Minister of Religion and Culture called “a national German intellectual hero.” Be that as it may, the books in their eighty-three crates came to Syracuse University.

The issue raised by the University's original acceptance and subsequent treatment of the library, alluded to in *The Daily Orange*, cannot be so quickly dismissed, however. After all, it was Ranke himself who advised: “. . . no search can bring to light anything worse than what is already assumed by unfounded conjecture and received by the world as established truth.” In the spirit of this sentiment, I have been reading the quite extensive file relating to the Ranke library, and the following facts strike me forcibly:

(1) If Bennett had the honor of “bagging” the catch, he was lucky not to have had the job of cataloging and maintaining it, having left Syracuse in 1884.

(2) The man who *did* inherit this task was Henry Orrin Sibley, Library Director from 1889. Bearing in mind that the eighty-three crates had arrived in 1888, being temporarily stored awaiting the opening of the new library in June, 1889, and that they contained about 20,000 books, pamphlets and manuscripts, one can give credence to the Chancellor's statement in January 1890 that “The work of cataloging and arranging the library has gone forward as rapidly as has been possible with the small force of inexperienced help at our command. The librarian has toiled incessantly all day and far into the night to advance this work. Much has been done and much yet remains to do. . . . It will yet be a considerable time before all the valuable treasures of our library will be in shape for use.”

(3) Exhausted librarian Sibley published part III of his article, “The Library,” in *The University News*, Feb. 9, 1891. He listed six things which can deprive a library of its proper scholarly function. They were (1) absorption in rare curios; (2) poor facilities – inadequate light, heat, etc.; (3) insufficient staff; (4) defective or incomplete cataloging; (5) needlessly complicated rules; (6) incapacity of the librarian, want of knowledge about his books, surliness. Obviously, these are perennial problems but of topical interest is the way in which Sibley continues. For he picks up the first item and comments: “The first cause generally occurs where a library is founded on the gift of some person who has had a mania for curios and has left a large collection of them as the nucleus of a library; or where successive and extensive gifts of valuable collections render it necessary to keep up and complete them, and so the efforts and means of the library are largely devoted to this purpose.”

(4) In *The Herald*, April 16, 1906, a column headed “A Pressing Need. Cataloging of the Von Ranke Library,” cast aspersions upon Sibley (who had

died in 1904) by highlighting the “fact” that “Only One Tenth of the Valuable Collection of Historical Works in the S.U. Library Has a Practical Catalogue,” resulting in the circumstance that the “Great Collection” has therefore been “unavailable for 18 years.” Mrs. Sibley, the widow and Acting Library Director, 1904-13, with some hostility took to the correspondence columns of *The Herald* on April 17. She corrected various errors in the article and further pointed out that her husband’s labors in cataloging had been wiped out in 1895 by the decision of the library committee to adopt the Dewey system, and that the task of starting again from scratch had been continually hampered by lack of staff and facilities.

Enough evidence is presented in the four preceding paragraphs, I believe, to allow of a few compassionate conclusions: that Sibley, a sick man toward the end of his life, was terribly overworked and had labor problems with which the library staff, vintage 1972, can sympathize; that Sibley – and this conclusion may be challenged but seems to me difficult to escape – had formulated an attitude to the Ranke library which, to say the least, precluded any vision of its creative function, such as Bennett had in mind. I am, of course, here, arguing a connection between his comments in *The University News* and his current experience.

While I have no intention of subjecting the reader to an overlong study of the problems associated with the Ranke library, it will be well to explore how several successive library regimes have grappled with the same problems as Sibley. Indeed, it has been in coming to terms with *their* attitudes to the collection that I have felt confident to interpret Sibley’s attitude the way I have.

After 1906, as a result of a concerted drive, most of the collection was cataloged. This was by no means a “full cataloging” as Director Miller would optimistically describe it in a letter to a German scholar in 1936. Indeed, a few years later, under pressure from outside, he would be approaching the Carl Schurz Foundation for money to complete the cataloging, also with a view to publicizing the collection somewhat. This effort failing, he would resume in 1949 the tone of 1936, telling an official of the same foundation that the collection was “completely cataloged.” The occasion that called forth this statement is worth detailing because it brings us to a circumstance that was obviously important for the development of attitudes to the Ranke library. An exceedingly green foundation executive, who had clearly not read the extensive correspondence with Syracuse in 1943, had the gall to write Miller in July 1949 suggesting that as, by common report, the collection was still in boxes “awaiting a time when it will reach a suitable place either in your library or in some other library in the country,” then perhaps the library of the foundation, a supporter of German-American relations, would be the best “resting place”! A note of pardonable sarcasm crept into Miller’s reply when he thanked the foundation for its “generous offer.”

The idea that the collection was still unpacked was simply an extreme form of rumors that had been rife for a long time about Syracuse's mistreatment of the Ranke library. We have seen that, in 1906, guilt was already being attributed in public on this score. Much later, in 1943, a Dr. Thorne of the Carl Schurz Foundation told Miller that his knowledge of the collection derived from information "that the library had fallen into disuse to some extent and various scholars have inquired about ways and means of seeing that it could be used more by research students and others." Later still, in 1964, Aladar Goellner, in a curious book called *Von Ranke and the American. Seven Beyond the Grave Colloquies*, had von Ranke say of his books at Syracuse:

... there they are ... and nobody knows about them, with the exception of some elderly gentlemen or curators in charge of collections. Nobody reads them. All my personal books, including all those that I have written myself, are with this same university library, and nobody consults them, I am sure. I've even heard mention of some "dungeon" there where they are locked up or stored.

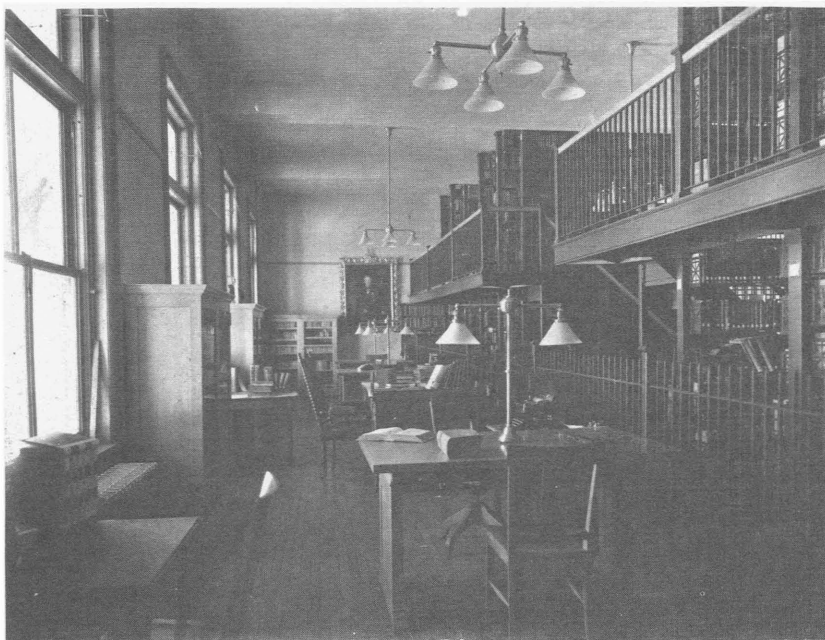
Curiouser and curiouser; but, to get back to reality, Miller in 1937 sent Chancellor Graham a copy of the German Ranke scholar Hoeft's *Das Schicksal der Ranke-Bibliothek*, much of the research for which had been done at Syracuse in 1930 and which was very generous in its references to Syracuse's treatment of the books. Miller's covering note said: "His favorable attitude should do much to still the unpleasant notoriety that we had some years ago." Exactly what occasion he was referring to, I am unsure. I do not think he was harking back to 1906. Possibly someone had created a fuss in the 1920s, for a revealing memo from the Chancellor in December 1926 says: "Kindly prepare for me summary of record of Van Ranke Library, the nature of the gifts and obligations incurred in receiving it, etc., etc." Less than a year later, in September 1927, the new Library Director Miller was writing a concern in New York City about the possibility of publishing a catalog of the collection. Nothing came of this save, presumably, the realization that it would be too expensive. In 1928, the "1905 library again becoming overcrowded," Miller wrote someone in 1944, "a new room (401) was constructed over the old one (307) and the Ranke Library removed to it. . . ." It was this room that Curator of Special Collections Lester G. Wells would refer to in 1953 as "a kind of sublimated attic."

So, in the late 1920s, most likely under some sort of pressure, fresh attention was paid to the collection, the sum result of which was hardly beneficial: one more move, one more physical challenge to a hoard of old books. One senses Sibley's impatience of 1891 in Miller and Wells' resigned comments from time to time about a collection that they experienced more

as an albatross than an asset. In 1944 Miller tells Wells that Ranke books cannot be discarded “without bringing down the wrath of the Gods if ever discovered.” In 1945 Wells, alluding to the conditions under which the library had been bought, writes:

If the integrity of the Ranke Collection will have to be maintained for ever, I suppose these maps will have to be left with the Ranke books and pamphlets; if not, we should give thought to incorporating these Ranke maps with our general map collection, wherever and whatever that may be.

With the exception of an unsuccessful attempt by Miller in the early 1930s to interest Syracuse’s German community in paying for needed rebinding and cataloging, none of the several initiatives in the first half of the century appears to have come from the library hierarchy. I will emphasize again that the financial obstacles must have seemed overwhelming at times but that the evidence points to some reluctance about even spending what money there was on the Ranke books. Take, for example, a memo to Miller in 1950 saying that the backs of nearly all of the 52 volumes of Ranke’s collected works are detached and “As a modest start toward refurbishing the RA Collection, will you okay the above work?” The reply: “Yes. But better



The Von Ranke Collection in its first Carnegie Library setting.
Photo from Syracuse University Archives.

hold till the fall as Mutual (the bindery) may not do any of our binding in the Summer and the volumes better stay here than in the shop." Delayed action resulted in *no* action. The *Sammelte Werke* remain to this day, 22 years later, in the same dilapidated condition!

But let us return again to earlier days, the 1930s. Remember that Miller then had no specialized help in the collections and that quite possibly the attitudes that he inherited and/or generated toward the Ranke library in the 15 years of his directorship before Wells came to help him about 1943 probably qualified the sorts of endeavors that he was prepared to encourage thereafter. In the 1930s, Miller's feeling for the collection is made abundantly clear in the context of a new push for action. On November 9, 1937, the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees moved:

That the Director of the Library and Mr. Thurston [the Business Supervisor] be requested to immediately investigate the condition of this library [i.e., the Ranke] and recommend to the Executive Committee a plan for restoring these books, including the cost thereof, and a plan for doing the work on an installment basis.

Miller's reply went like this, in a memo to Thurston early in 1938. He first clubbed him with the news that in the fall of 1937 "a fairly accurate estimate" of the cost of rebinding the 5,980 books in disrepair, including leather treatment, was about \$10,000. (This in itself, of course, is some sort of index to the neglect of the books since 1888.) He went on:

All of this would be very nice to do and, of course, should be done eventually but I think the History Dept. would agree with me that the expense is not warranted at the present time. The value of the collection now is chiefly sentimental. It was very valuable at the time of purchase in 1886 and, really, Syracuse should never have spent the money for it then as the small, struggling college wasn't yet ready for books which were of use to graduate students who could read German. At the present time, the Collection which naturally bulked large in secondary sources is largely out-of-date, for these secondary sources have now been supplanted by recent ones which have benefited by new findings made since that time. The books are all listed in the card catalog of the library but we almost never have a call for any of them.

Apart from the incidental ignorance betrayed here about the real contents of the library — there are, for example, thousands of books in English and French, too, and Professor Vernon McKay of the History Department could tell Miller in 1942 that "probably the best sources for original research in the Ranke Library are in French" — Miller reveals that he

has been less than candid in a letter to Hoeft in 1936, which the latter actually published in his book. He told Hoeft:

Please believe that all of us here hold the collection in high regard. We have continued many of the sets of periodicals and documents [would that this were so!] and wish that funds were available to be able to demonstrate more completely our gratification in having the library of so famous a scholar at Syracuse University.

Again, the statement that the books are cataloged but rarely asked for is only a half-truth. Mrs. Roorbach of the Carl Shurz Foundation, a graduate of Syracuse, wrote Miller in 1937 that "we knew there were such books somewhere but rather too sacred for ordinary touch." But even those with "extraordinary" touch were, as Vernon McKay pointed out in 1942, inhibited from using the collection for the simple reason that the pamphlets and manuscripts at the heart of the library were inadequately cataloged, if at all.

Miller's memo plainly offered no encouragement for attempting a task that had been culpably neglected for decades, against the spirit of the stipulations made at purchase. Apparently Dr. Miller had made no formal response to the Trustees in 1938, for on January 15, 1940, Thurston sent him another copy of the original motion, requesting him to "advise what, in your opinion, we should do." Miller thereupon submitted a summary of his views to the Chancellor which Thurston conveyed, adding the covering note: "If you agree with Dr. Miller, there seems to be nothing further to do regarding this at present."

I have dwelt at length on this incident because it illustrates very well the tensions which have made the Ranke library a storm center at periodic intervals in the history of the overall library system. Assuming generally inadequate staffing and financial resources, little could be done for the collection which therefore declined more and more in physical state while yet seeing little use. Use itself was restricted by the fact that the library appealed more to advanced students than to the run-of-the-mill undergraduate, but the very items that such students would want to consult tended to be uncataloged. Naturally, the cost of dealing radically with the collection's needs spiralled as the years passed; what, for example, Miller could estimate in 1937 as costing \$10,000 is estimated in 1972 as costing certainly no less than \$100,000. And who knows what the charge might be, just assuming the books are not then beyond repair, in a few decades hence?

In the meantime, with the growth of the University and the expansion of its faculty, tension was going to come from yet another source. Mercifully freed, as I have noted, from the necessity of managing the Ranke library, Bennett had contributed, as the most scholarly in the line of library directors,

a great private collection and the vision of how it should be used. Almost certainly he did not bargain for the attendant problems of housing and cataloging, but, as a scholar, he did appreciate keenly that a library only has as much life as one is prepared to give it. He said something to this effect in his address of 1889, noting that often one must make bold plans, in faith that the means will turn up to realize them. Unfortunately, the bold plans were not made in the succeeding years, with results very well summarized in a recent talk given at Syracuse by Charles W. Mann (printed in *The Courier*, IX, no. 3, p. 31): “Too often special collections are neglected which is no fault of the books.” This was the exact fate of the Ranke library: neglected for understandable reasons, its reputation declined; given no life, it seemed to have none to give.

The further source of tension, then, was between an expanding and therefore far more aggressive group of scholars in the faculty, and a library staff that had to take care of growing demands on its time without ever having come to terms with inherited problems. The faculty, to parody William Blake, saw only human faces behind the pitiful state of the major special collection, while the librarians found it difficult not to react with a certain bitterness or wry humor when a professor came along and “discovered” yet another rare item “lost” in the Ranke library by its custodians. As Miller, with a delightful touch of humor, wrote in 1953 to a former colleague: “Professors are still professors and as Alice says: ‘The elephants do bother so.’”

The major confrontation came over the resolve of a herd of “elephants” in 1950, led by Dr. Howard Brogan, to produce a critical catalog of 100 of what they judged to be particularly important items among the Venetian *relazioni*. There could not help but be a certain amount of natural friction in this sort of undertaking, the librarians getting upset over the occasional careless handling of documents, the scholars equally upset about what seemed the merely bureaucratic mentality of the librarians. And how could a man like Miller, who had given long years and long hours to the library since 1927, react calmly to the report in *The Herald-American*, Sunday, July 13, 1952, covering the publication of the professors’ labors:

Everybody at Syracuse University had always taken for granted the collection was valuable. Hardly anybody had bothered to find out precisely why. Relatively untroubled by scholars, the great portion of the collection slept peacefully thru the years after the university bought it . . . in 1887. It took a trio of apparently prosaic professors to play Prince Charming to the slumbering manuscripts some 65 years later.

Prince Charming, indeed! Yes, one will hardly be surprised that part of Miller’s response to the challenge presented to the library by a growing

faculty was hostile. But it would be a grave injustice to see the library's response only in such terms.

First of all, some attempt was made to advertise the library's wares. Thus, as early as the June 1946 issue of the *Alumni News*, Lester Wells produced an article entitled: "Library Prizes von Ranke Collection." Consisting of a photo, a headline and nineteen sentences, it made the claim that "The subject matter consists, broadly speaking, of the history of Europe in medieval times with emphasis on the history of the Papacy and the Republic of Venice." It concluded: "The University Library is justifiably proud of the Ranke collection and appreciative of the privilege of being able to provide such important historical materials for scholars engaged in serious research." This article certainly meant *something*, even if "broadly speaking" was the crucial phrase.

Secondly, a willingness to see the library's users as at least part-time partners in the organization of the collections was apparent. For example, in 1956, the year of Miller's retirement, Wells proposed to circulate the following letter to "approx. 50 faculty who've used the Ranke Library and especially those who compiled the book on the manuscripts":

When our Rare Book Room and its adjoining stack room are finished and equipped we desire to give serious thought to what titles in the Ranke Library are worthy of housing there. We are interested to learn what titles you consider to be important and valuable from the standpoint of

1. Importance for research and/or
2. Possible difficulty of replacement and/or
3. Monetary value.

Will you kindly jot down on the verso of this sheet any suggestions you have and return it to us.

Unfortunately, Miller's response to the proposal was negative. Arguing that "we, especially yourself" are "better judges of what is valuable" than the fifty faculty; that few of the faculty would "pay any attention to the note;" that a purely personal appeal to a selected few would be a better procedure; that even those who might respond "but who are not intelligent library-wise" would "suggest moving half the collection," he concluded that the end result of such an appeal would be to "leave us in the same position of having to make the selection ourselves." With some understatement, Wells noted below Miller's response, "I have concluded that the director does not want me to send out the accompanying letter."

Finally, along with the necessity of regulating more carefully the conditions under which the Ranke material could be read (appropriate to the increased demand), went an almost stubborn insistence on perpetuating the old attitude toward the great collection. A little note from Wells to Dr.

Confer in the History Department in October 1950, the year the collection was first opened on a regular daily basis, itemizing the rules governing the use of Ranke books for reserve purposes, was perfectly proper. Entirely improper, it seems, in view of the sheer size, value and composition of the Ranke library was the policy of Miller vis-à-vis the collection, laid down in September 1950 and communicated in a memo of Wells to a Miss Ferris. After several quite sensible principles, which paid respect to the integrity of the library, albeit in a slightly negative way, the memo concluded: "We do not collect everything by and about Ranke as we do Stephen Crane." This was all too unfortunately true. Several groups of Ranke letters, for instance, had been offered to the library in the 1940s at low prices and had been summarily refused. In 1952/53, yet another batch of 650 letters was offered at \$1 apiece by a great-grandson of Ranke, with the related possibility of a further 253 letters from the great-grandson's aunt. Though Wells did express interest, an offer was not made. When one considers that the library purchased 18 autograph Ranke letters along with 300 miscellaneous items in 1965 at Christie's, at what was conceded to be a bargain price of approximately \$2,200, one may appreciate the extent of the damage done by such a negative policy. Of course, was there the money to buy in the 1940s or in 1953? Was there the money to bind in 1938?

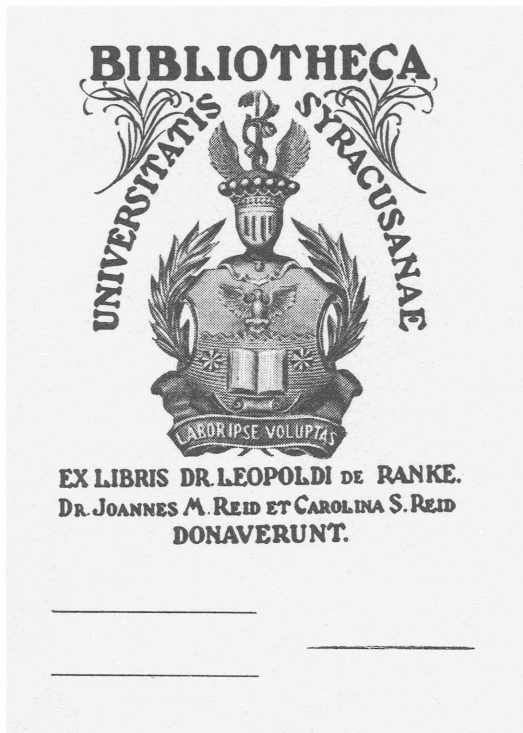
As one looks back over the period of time covered by this article, it becomes manifest that the scope of discussion has gradually narrowed. From Ranke himself and the tradition he represented, we have moved to the books he left, the use and treatment of his books, and finally the users and treaters themselves. Perhaps in drawing to a close we can fruitfully ask ourselves about the present and future state of the questions we have raised.

Whatever may be in store for the Western scholarly tradition, there are no very obvious signs that the utility of a collection such as Ranke put together is going to be soon challenged. If anything, the vastly increased use of the Ranke library, even if the cynic will maintain some sort of functional explanation for the phenomenon, argues a *more* serious appreciation of its virtues as a door to a better understanding of the varieties of human experience. And while greater use provides more potential for personal dissatisfaction — books handled clumsily, impatience at red-tape — it also allows for greater practical cooperation between the custodian and the researcher. Misunderstandings fester when the imagination is allowed to generate a totally unrealistic view of the other person's problems. The very fact that this article should have been written is itself a testimony to cooperation, a testimony to the necessity of coming to terms on all sides with what needs to be done.

To quote Charles Mann's address once more: "Like all divisions of a university, rare book rooms exist to support the teaching program, and that teaching program is built upon cooperation." And later: "[The rare book room] must avoid at all costs becoming a last bastion of class differences in

the shape of a quiet museum at the top of a stairwell. . . . Today, I think the really sad state of affairs is that in which rare book collections go untended, where memorial, archival, stored or other materials subsist inside a library, yet are without librarians to look after them.” And last of all: “[The rare book department] is as essential to the climate of learning of a university as all the other functioning units in the library of which it is an equal part.”

Mann says really all that needs to be said about what must be done for the Ranke library. It is not a Cinderella. If given the life it desperately needs, in terms of finance for cataloging and restoring, and staffing for carrying out these tasks, it will give back life in return.



The Von Ranke Library bookplate.