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An Address by Professor C.W. Bennett, Read at the Dedication of the New Library at Syracuse University

Charles W. Bennett

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**EX LIBRIS DR. LEOPOLDI DE RANKE.
DR. JOANNES M. REID ET CAROLINA S. REID
DONAVERUNT.**

*Von Ranke Library Bookplate
Syracuse University*

THE COURIER

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The Purchase of the von Ranke Library

An Address by Professor C.W. Bennett, Read at the Dedication of the
New Library of Syracuse University

Mine shall be the humble task of giving a simple statement of the genesis, progress and final consummation of the purchase of the von Ranke library, which may well be regarded as the originating cause of the beautiful edifice which is to be dedicated today. Like most good and permanent results, the securing of this library came from patient waiting and hard, well-directed labor.

The Genesis

In 1874 the name of C.W. Bennett first appears in the catalogue as librarian of Syracuse University. As nearly as can now be recollected the library then consisted of from 1,000 to 1,200 well-selected books which had been purchased with funds furnished by the trustees; from 300 to 400 volumes of state and general government documents; a very choice collection of some 200 to 300 volumes, mostly of leading German serials in the departments of Chemistry, Physics and Geology purchased in Europe by Chancellor Alexander Winchell; and some 400 or 500 *curiosa*, the gifts of various persons kindly disposed towards the University, but whose main design seemed to be to clear out the lumber and refuse material of their private libraries. The entire library could not have aggregated more than 2,300 volumes. All felt how meager and totally inadequate was such a collection for a university even in the third year of its history. The new librarian was greatly troubled by the situation: chagrin and shame was felt when stranger visitors made inquiry respecting the library. The financial crash of 1873 had already warned the trustees and friends of the infant enterprise that every sail must be reefed in order to save from early ruin. None but the participants and patient sufferers during that long subsequent struggle for life can ever understand the situation. To hope for library appropriations from the general funds under the then existing circumstances was utterly vain; to simply rest in the situation seemed to the librarian impossible.



JOHN MORRISON REID

Early in 1875 the Reverend Dr. J.M. Reid and wife were guests of the librarian and his family. In the progress of the conversation one day the inquiry was made: "What is the most pressing need of the University aside from general endowment?" The answer was prompt: "An increase of the library." That conversation resulted a few months later in the gift of \$5,000 and the expenses of the librarian to visit Europe and make purchases. He went in June 1875, spending three months at the chief book marts, Edinburgh, London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Berlin, Leipsig and Paris, and making himself thoroughly acquainted with the ways and means of the trade in order to [take] intelligent action in the future. The result was the addition of about 4,500 carefully selected volumes in the departments of English, German and French literature, (in historical development) in Latin and Greek classics, in history, ethics and mathematics. It was on this purchasing tour in 1875 that the special attention of the librarian was directed to the great value of the von Ranke library as one specially rich for the scholar of history and one which was being constantly enriched by gift and purchase. Parties most familiar with the contents of the collection spoke most enthusiastically of its great value, and said that it might possibly be purchased on the death of the great collector and scholar. Of course my own interest in the library was greatly intensified from the fact that eight years before it had been my supreme pleasure to be a pupil of this foremost historian of the century, whose method had done more to kindle the true historic spirit in America than any and all other men of the last forty years.⁶

After returning to America, an early interview was had with Dr. Reid, and an account rendered of the manner and results of the purchase which his generous gift had made possible. During this interview the librarian made this remark half playfully, half in earnest, "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." For this has always been my theory, that 6,000 to

⁶There was something more than mere reputation that led the American Historical Association to proclaim Leopold von Ranke the "greatest living historian" and to elect him its only honorary member. Before professional, graduate degree granting history departments existed at American universities, American scholars traveled to Berlin to study under Ranke. When the first history department was set up at Johns Hopkins, it was staffed by Ranke students and its method of teaching was modeled after the Ranke seminar at the University of Berlin. Soon other American universities began to set up history departments (Harvard, Yale, and Syracuse were next); and by the late 1880's when history had become an important part of the American university curriculum, almost every department claimed to have at least one faculty member like Bennett who had been trained under Leopold von Ranke.



CAROLINE REID

10,000 well-selected volumes are sufficient for the wants of the undergraduate, but to keep the professors from mental hunger and starvation, sources, authorities, and books of a very different kind must be had in large numbers and in special collections. Upon what might intellectually fatten an undergraduate, a competent professor might starve. I shall never forget Dr. Reid's reply to my statement, "What will it cost?" said he. Upon my mentioning a very large price, such as had been given by competent judges in Berlin, he said: "This is beyond my means; but keep your eye on this treasure and it may be that by the time von Ranke is through with it my ability to purchase may have increased." Noble words, and the seeds of rich fruitage garnered twelve years later in this beautiful edifice. This may be called the genesis of the movement to secure the von Ranke library.

Progressive Action

During the following years it need not be said that the librarian was active and upon the alert for any news relative to the health of Leopold von Ranke. At that time von Ranke was eighty years old. His death might be expected at any time, probably at a very early date. Meanwhile intimate relations were established between the librarian and two of the most wide-awake book firms of Berlin, — they promising to give instructions respecting any changes which might occur in the library itself, by the way of accessions, etc., or in the physical condition of the great historian. The zeal in this matter, however, never flagged, either on the part of the librarian or of the good and generous man and woman who from the first had shown a most lively interest in the final securing of this library. This effort illustrates a principle in human life and development. By pondering great enterprises or living in the presence of great and good men our own minds and character are insensibly educated and liberalized. We come to think possible of achievement what before seemed absolutely beyond our power of attainment.

During the ten following years I noted a growing interest on the part of Dr. Reid and his good wife. Possibly Providence had kindly multiplied their ability to do large things (of this I have no positive knowledge, however), but I am inclined to believe that the principle just noticed was the real cause of their strengthening belief that they could do what at first seemed beyond their ability.

Nine years passed by. Meantime the great historian had proposed to attempt what might well appall a man in middle life - viz., to write

a Universal History in eight volumes, bringing the volumes fully up to the latest results of documentary, epigraphical and archaeological evidence. While finishing his eighth volume this wonderful man lay down upon his pine bedstead in the midst of his books, saying to Dr. Wiedermann, his chief amanuensis, "O Doctor, if your strength had only held out last night we could have finished our work; it spread out before me in panorama; but it is too late; I am weary;" and the great historian soon passed peacefully to the *Jenseits*.⁷

In 1884 the Library of Syracuse University passed into other and better hands, the former librarian having accepted the chair of Historical Theology in Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Illinois. But not for a moment did his interest in the one great object diminish, nor did the zeal of the munificent donors flag. Correspondence revealed the fact that the market value of the von Ranke library had in the ten years nearly or quite trebled. A price unthought of in 1875 was boldly and confidently set upon the collection in 1884. Large accession of monumental works had been made, and gifts from the greatest and best had greatly enriched the contents.

The Consummation

In May, 1886, I had left home to spend four to five months in the British Museum, that paradise for scholars, in verifications and new studies of my *Christian Archaeology*.⁸ I was to sail from New York on Wednesday. On Monday my eye fell upon a cablegram from Berlin, announcing the death of Leopold von Ranke at the ripe age of 91. I immediately hastened to find Dr. Reid, showing the dispatch. "Now is our chance," said I, "and no time to lose." He told me to find out all I could relative to the situation and keep him informed. Meantime a system of cyphers was agreed upon by which cablegrams could be utilized in case of necessity, and I set out for London with a very anxious mind. To tell the simple truth, no one plan of my life had so absorbed my thought, and in whose consummation I had such deep interest. I knew the contingencies, but I was resolved to do all in my power to secure a result which had been a darling purpose for twelve years. Immediately on reaching London I wrote to confidential agents in Berlin to ascertain everything possible respecting the library and the probability of its purchase. The reply, that nothing could be done under six months, that certain tedious legal forms must be observed, that the heirs must be satisfied, etc., was to me thoroughly

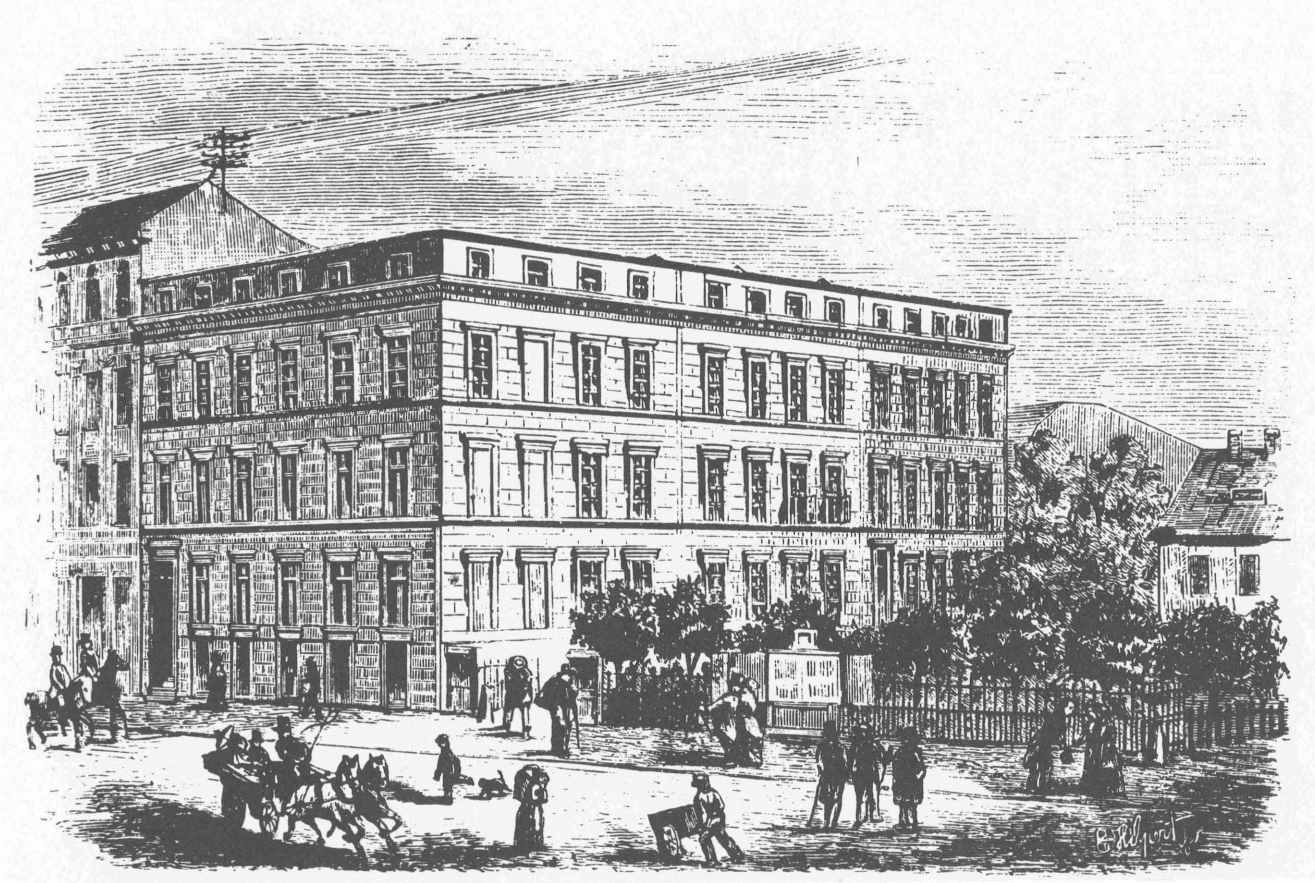
⁷The "Beyond."

⁸See Charles Wesley Bennett, *Christian Archaeology* (New York: Philips and Hunt, 1888).

unsatisfactory. I knew the proverbial slowness of the German shopkeepers, and the hesitation even of book-dealers to approach men in high governmental positions. The thought of waiting six months could not once be entertained. I knew that at least a half-dozen American colleges were anxious to secure the library in whole or in part, and that their agents would leave no stone unturned to gain their ends.⁹ Acting on this conviction I resolved to undertake the negotiations in person. Otto von Ranke, elder son of this historian, chaplain of the great Soldiers' Orphanage at Potsdam, was found to be the legal representative of the heirs. I telegraphed him to grant me an interview. My reception was very cordial, and my statement of the fact that I had been a student of his father, and that he had done more than all other men to kindle in the minds of younger Americans the true historic spirit, seemed to open the heart of the son, whose affection for the father had been strong as life, and whose memory was now cherished with an almost idolatrous devotion. He frankly said that there was no probability that I or any other party could obtain the library since the family and the German literary public confidently expected that the Prussian government would purchase it. At the same time he readily gave me the refusal of the library in case the government failed to take it. This is all that *could* be done, and I was satisfied. The reason of his ready consent that the library should go to America, in case that it was not purchased by the government, was revealed to me in a letter a year later, after the purchase had been consummated: "I felt sorry for the gentleman (me), for he entertained hope of securing the library, when he was doomed to certain disappointment. I wished to do all I could to save the gentleman's feelings, and hence readily promised him the first chance. I had not the remotest thought of the possibility of his success."

Otto von Ranke promised to give a final decision early in August — my visit being made on the 8th of July. No one can know the anxiety felt by me as to this decision. I left London in August for a short run upon the Continent with my son. Who can tell with what trembling I enquired for letters at Lucerne, Berne, Cologne and Amsterdam wither I had instructed von Ranke to mail the result of his negotiations with the government? Meantime the aged Emperor was trying to recuperate at the Baths of Ems, allowing none but the most urgent state affairs to be mentioned; the Minister of the Interior was difficult of access; war clouds were hanging, black and threatening, in the European skies; public interest was absorbed in anything than the purchase of a private library, even though it was that of the Emperor's life-long friend and confidential advisor. No letters reached me.

⁹Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Cornell were rumored to be among the six.



Leopold von Ranke spend the last forty years of his life in this apartment house in Luisen Strasse. His library occupied five rooms in apartment 2A located on the second floor while Ranke lodged himself in two rooms on the third.

I returned to America in September, meanwhile instructing von Ranke to do all business with special agents, whom I had most minutely instructed.¹⁰ Meantime the library was removed to the building of the Royal Library, so confident were the Ranke heirs that the government would make the purchase, especially as this had been advocated by the leading journals of Germany.

It need not be said that the following months were full of anxiety, and that they were thoroughly improved by correspondence, cablegrams, etc. It became evident that the Prussian government was not in a position to spend money on libraries, since everything pointed to a general European war in which Germany must play a chief part. On the other hand it was evident that the Ranke heirs were very loath to allow their father's collection to come to America. A just family pride and a commendable regard for the famous historian's reputation caused this most natural feeling. Nevertheless all knew that no private parties in Germany could buy the library in its entirety, and to leave the results of sixty years of collection to be scattered on the general market was more repugnant to the feelings of the family than its removal and careful preservation in a foreign country.

It was not until March 1887 — eight months after my first interview with Otto von Ranke that I sent him an ultimatum, viz., that his decision must be lodged with my agents within two weeks or all negotiations for the purchase would cease. (It need not be said that the wishes of the generous donors were in all results consulted.)¹¹ This brought a decision. How was my heart gladdened, while I was visiting the Missouri Conference, on receiving a cablegram, forwarded from my home, announcing the consummation of a long cherished plan — the purchase of the von Ranke library. And while personally I could not hope to reap the benefits which such a collection affords, an institution to which I had given fourteen of the best years of my life would be greatly enriched and my successor in the chair of history would greatly rejoice.

¹⁰Apparently these agents, who crated the books before they were moved to the Royal Library, were working for Bennett as well as Otto von Ranke. In the account of the transaction that Bennett forwarded to the American Historical Association in the spring of 1888, he wrote: "When I looked it over in the *Wohnung* [i.e. dwelling place or residence], in Luisen Strasse, my agents and myself estimated it at 25,000 volumes...My agents have since written me that they were utterly amazed at the treasures on treasures which they found on cleaning out the shelves and catch-alls of the old *Wohnung*". See Charles W. Bennett's *Papers of the American Historical Association*³ (1889): 132.

¹¹At first John and Caroline Reid tried to keep their largess a secret. Besides donating the original price of the books (believed to have been \$25,000), they also gave the university library a \$100,000 endowment which drew \$6,000 yearly for the purchase of new books. Unfortunately, this has since been "channeled...into other projects."



The Von Ranke Library at the time of its dedication in 1889. This was the new home specifically built to house the books of Leopold von Ranke upon their arrival at Syracuse University. It is now the Administration Building.

And now began the Herculean task of removal from the Royal Library, the completion of imperfect serials, the repairing of worn and damaged volumes, the binding of unbound numbers, the careful classification and binding of thousands of pamphlets, the complete cataloging of the entire collection, the examination and estimate of the more than four hundred manuscripts by a professional paleographer, etc. This work required many months of time and involved the expenditure of a very large sum of money.¹² The result is, this is probably the most complete private historical library, for scholarly investigation, in America. Thanks, ten thousand thanks to the modest yet noble and generous donors! It is safely housed in this beautiful building, where, we most ardently hope, it may be a source of inspiration to many and earnest historical investigators.

Such is the plain, unvarnished account of the genesis, the progress and the consummation of the purchase of the Von Ranke Library.

The Value of the Library

The questions always asked by the practical American are: Does it pay? Are the results satisfactory? Is the library, after all, worth what it has cost? Would it not have been far wiser to spend the money in the purchase of English books which all could understand and use, or in aiding all departments rather than one? These questions are pertinent and should be answered.

The value set upon his collection by the great historian may be inferred from the fact, attested by the *Magdeburger Zeitung* and the *Zentralblatt* that he kept it insured for 100,000 thalers.¹³ So much for his estimate of its money value. But it must be remembered that this is not a popular collection, appropriate for a circulating library, but a scholar's library to satisfy one who needs to go to the very sources of information respecting history. Necessarily such a library cannot be in any one language, but must contain books in languages almost as various as the peoples whose history we would understand. Nor is it enough that we have these authorities in translation merely. Translations are only the expression of the opinion of the translator respecting the original text, and hence they are liable to be warped to sustain the views of the particular school to which the translator may belong.

¹²Apparently the Reids donated the money for this also, bringing the total cost of the Ranke Collection up to \$40,000.

¹³This was equivalent to 300,000 marks or \$75,000.

The original texts must be at hand to correct errors and enable the writer to verify results. Then we must consider that Syracuse University has had in its employ, as an agent to collect its historical library, the foremost historian of the century, the historiographer of a government noted for its patronage of learning and the man most favorably situated of any other, through a period of sixty years. Is such service worth nothing? Suppose the professor of Greek in this university could have employed the renowned Böckh for like time in collecting a library for his department; or the professor of Latin, the noted Haupt, or Theodore Mommsen; or the professor of physics, Helmholtz or Sir William Townsend; or the professor of philosophy, Trendelenburg, Sir William Hamilton, or Jouffroy? Would such agents count nothing in the results of sixty years of careful collection of materials for their special departments? Very inconsiderate would he be who should despise the services of such men.

Again it must be recollected that most of true inspiration to the undergraduate comes from his professor. If the professors are continuously drinking at the living fountains of knowledge, the student himself will have a corresponding freshness of thought and purpose. The bane of most of us is a certain narrowness of thought which in the end degenerates into social, political, intellectual or religious intolerance. The antidote of this is usually contact and sympathy with great minds and great enterprises which broaden our views and shame our littleness. Let him who is ready indiscriminately to brand the monkish orders of the Catholic Church as herds of lazy, useless and degenerate recluses, run through the 365 folio volumes of Migne's *Patrology*,¹⁴ and his prejudice is partially allayed when he finds that this enormous work of collecting and editing was accomplished by the skillful, well directed division of labor of the Benedictine monks. Let the student who is accustomed to pass lightly over the history of the Middle Ages as of little account, go into this Von Ranke Library and look through that magnificent result of associated Protestant scholarship, the *Monumenta Germaniae*,¹⁵ and his respect for the men

¹⁴This is a round figure for Jacques Paul Migne's *Patrologiae Cursus Completus... Series Graeca* which was published in 161 volumes and *Patrologiae Cursus Completus... Series Latina*, published in 221 volumes.

¹⁵Perhaps it would be more accurate to call the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, a work of German scholarship, since many of the students who flocked to von Ranke's seminars and worked on the *Monumenta* were not Protestants. The enormous task of editing and publishing medieval German sources that the *Monumenta* represents, is still under way. Thanks again must go to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, which is generously completing Leopold von Ranke's personal set of this multi-volumed work at Syracuse. Some 200 additional volumes have appeared since the time of the historian's death in 1886.

and the civilization of what he has been accustomed to call the "Dark Ages" will strengthen and deepen and he will see that then, as now and ever, the race was longing for the best and truest, though often lost in the tangled mazes of error and wrong. Or, once again, let him who supposes that ancient history has been written once for all and lies before us like the fossilized forms of a far-off geologic age, spend a few days in the examination of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* or the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. An earnest man will rise from such an examination convinced that we have only just begun our studies of antiquity, and that even the classic volumes of Grote and Curtius need serious revision to bring them up to the requirements of most recent discovery.

But why spend time in defending the value of the library and the wisdom of its purchase when a dozen first-class American universities and colleges deeply regretted their inability to secure the treasure? As well defend the wisdom of employing Dr. Wolff for a half century in gathering the magnificent collection of engravings which adorn the splendid edifice yonder, (Crouse College). I therefore congratulate Syracuse University on securing this treasure. I congratulate the professors and students of history on having such superior aids to their higher studies. I congratulate the noble and generous donors on their ability to secure this great library and place in this community what must prove an inspiration to higher and more advanced historical study. Long may these dear friends live to see the benefits of their great gift! And may Syracuse University find numerous friends who will do for other departments what Dr. and Mrs. Reid have done for the department of History!