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Leopold von Ranke on Irish history and the Irish nation

Andreas D. Boldt

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Abstract: Every historian has heard of Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) who was one of the most influential historians of the nineteenth century. He made important contributions to the emergence of modern history as a discipline and he has been called the father of “scientific” history. Due to him, methodological principles of archival research and source criticism became standardised and commonplace in academic institutions and he is generally credited with the professionalisation of the historian's craft. The following article will analyse Ranke’s approach to writing history and his approach to contemporary Romantic and nationalistic ideas. First, I will introduce the reader to the main historical understanding of Ranke and his life before approaching his writing and understanding of Irish history. Several main countries such as Germany, France, Britain and Italy have been assessed before; however, Ranke’s connection to Ireland, both academically and personally, is explored to a much lesser extent. Therefore, I will assess in detail his writing and understanding of Irish history.

Subjects: British History; Modern History 1750–1945; Historiography; Irish History; Intellectual History

Keywords: historiography; methodology; source criticism; nationalism; nineteenth-century Irish history

1. Introduction

Every historian has heard of Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) who was one of the most influential historians of the nineteenth century. He made important contributions to the emergence of modern history as a discipline and he has been called the father of “scientific” history. Due to him,
methodological principles of archival research and source criticism became standardised and commonplace in academic institutions and he is generally credited with the professionalisation of the historian’s craft.

Nevertheless, with fame comes criticism and Ranke is not only a much praised historian, but also one of the most criticised. Much has been written about him over the last 120 years, for example some aspects which have received attention are his early life (von Laue, 1950), his methodology (Krieger, 1977) and his shaping of the discipline of history (Iggers & Powell, 1990), while a collection of essays looking at particular topics has also been published (Elvert & Salewski, 2002). Over the years, several myths have evolved, such as Ranke the scientific historian, Ranke the Protestant apologist or Ranke the nationalistic Prussian who wrote monarchist history. These are only a few examples demonstrating that it is difficult to investigate Ranke’s concept of historical writing as most investigations of his historical writing were based on his works on larger nation states and excluding smaller ones such as Serbia and Ireland. He can only be understood when set against the backdrop of the intellectual and political climate of his time. Born in 1795, he reflects currents of early nineteenth-century thought, the Romantic interest in the past, the organic conception of society, the distrust of the French Enlightenment and of the political ideology of the Revolution, but he also retained an element of eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism, which preserved him from the one-sided nationalism of many of his contemporaries.

The following article will therefore analyse Ranke’s approach to writing history and his approach to contemporary Romantic and nationalistic ideas. First, I will introduce the reader to the main historical understanding of Ranke and his life before approaching his writing and understanding of Irish history. Several main countries such as Germany, France, Britain and Italy have been assessed before; however, Ranke’s connection to Ireland, both academically and personally, is explored to a much lesser extent. Therefore, I will assess in detail his writing and understanding of Irish history. Was he influenced by contemporary writers such as T.B. Macaulay and the Romantic and nationalistic ideas of the time? What role did his Irish wife Clarissa play? Did she have due to her homeland connections an influence on Ranke’s objectivity when writing his English History? This article will give a different insight into Ranke as an academic and as a private man portraying how he did not always treat history “objectively”.

2. Life and work of Leopold von Ranke

Leopold von Ranke was born on 21 December 1795, in Wiehe, a small Thuringian town, which in 1815 became a part of the kingdom of Prussia, to a family that had traditionally entered the Lutheran ministry and which was deeply religious (Figure 1). At the University of Leipzig, he studied theology and classics, concentrating particularly on philology and the translation of texts. Ranke wrote his dissertation on the political ideas of Thucydides and it was classical philology rather than history that drew him to this topic. He turned to history later, during the seven years (1818–1824) he spent teaching classics and ancient history in a grammar school at Frankfurt an der Oder. His first major work Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535 was published late in 1824. The most influential part of the work was its appendix in which he assessed previous literature on the basis of the critical analysis of sources (Figure 2). For him, this was scholarly history. It was in the preface to his work that he stated his often quoted dictum, that he was writing history as it had actually occurred, “wie es eigentlich gewesen”. Due to the success of his work, Ranke was appointed professor of history at the University of Berlin in 1825, a position he held until he retired in 1871. Ranke went abroad late in 1827 and remained away for over three years, searching for documents in Vienna, Florence, Rome and Venice. He had several personal connections that he put to good use, thereby securing access to archives that had not been opened before. After his return to Berlin in 1831, Ranke wrote his most famous work, Die römischen Päpste (1834–1836). His long searches in Italy set the pattern for later leaves of absence. He punctuated his teaching with research trips, which often lasted many months, and these trips took to such places as London, Paris, Brussels, Vienna and The Hague. From 1841 onwards, he was the historiographer of the Prussian State and he wrote several books on Prussian history. Ranke’s work during the 1840s is marked by his Deutsche
Figure 1. Leopold von Ranke in 1865.

Source: Newspaper graphic drawn by August Neumann. Original in possession by Andreas Boldt.

Figure 2. Title page of the appendix volume which outlines the major methods of his historical research influencing all his future work. This work made Ranke instantly famous.

Source: Original book in possession of Andreas Boldt.
Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation (1839–1843) and his Neun Bücher preußischer Geschichte (1847–1848). His marriage to an Irish woman in 1843 changed his whole life. Clarissa Helena Graves (1808–1871), born in Dublin, came from the well-known Graves family and it was, in effect, an intellectual dynasty (Figure 3).

Ranke trained the first generation of professional historians at Berlin, including Georg Waitz and Jakob Burckhardt. King Maximilian II of Bavaria was inspired by him to establish a special Historical Commission within the Bavarian Academy of Sciences to which Ranke was appointed as chairman in 1858. During his later years, Ranke wrote national histories for each of the major states of Europe, and especially noteworthy are his Französische Geschichte (1852–1861) and Englische Geschichte (1859–1868). As Ranke’s reputation continued to grow, he was awarded many honours. He was granted entry to the hereditary nobility, adding “von” to his surname, in 1865; he was made a privy councillor of Prussia in 1882 and an honorary citizen of Berlin in 1885 (Figure 4). Ranke’s university career concluded in 1871 when he retired from his chair at Berlin. Nonetheless, by the time of his death in Berlin on 23 May 1886, he had completed nine volumes of Universal History.

Leopold von Ranke endeavoured to understand political order within its own historical context. To understand the nature of historical phenomena such as an institution and an idea, one had to consider its historical development and the changes it underwent over a period of time. Historical epochs, Ranke argued, should not be judged according to predetermined contemporary values or ideas. Rather, they had to be understood on their own terms by empirically establishing history “as things really were”. Ranke emphasised both “individuality” and “development” in history. Each historical phenomenon, epoch and event had its own individuality, and it was the task of the historian to establish its essence. To do this, historians had to immerse themselves in the epoch and assess it in a manner appropriate for that time. They had, in Ranke’s words, “to extinguish” their own personality. This individualising approach to the writing of history went hand in hand with a notion of historical development that, according to Ranke, was sanctioned by God’s will. This “Protestant” element in Ranke’s historical thinking and writing was significant. Despite the strong theological colouring, Ranke was always a secular historian, devoted to appraising the major forces in history. He taught the necessity of juxtaposing important universal trends with particular details. Yet, sometimes grand ideas seemed to work in a dialectical way, especially when confronted by a new set of ideas. Ranke viewed each nation and its people as unique entities producing forces of nationalism that no longer could be ignored. He was convinced in all his work that there was meaning and coherence in history and that the established political institutions embodied moral forces, yet he
emphatically rejected the reduction of history to a grand scheme. In Ranke’s opinion, the historian had to proceed from the particular or individual to the general, not the reverse, and it was the particular that opened the path to a perception of the great moral forces manifest in history. Despite his call for impartiality and objectivity, he was convinced of the solidity and beneficence of the established order as it had grown historically and so he projected a conservative bias into his conception of the past. Although he was aware of the new theories of evolution, and did not reject them, he preferred to leave questions of human prehistory out of historical narratives. With his seminar programme, Ranke set a model for the training of historians in systematic, critical research methods, which were copied throughout the world as history became a professional discipline. Ranke made important contributions to the emergence of modern history writing and is recognised as the father of the “scientific” historical school of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Due to him, methodical principles of archival research and source criticism became commonplace in academic institutions. Using his new method (the philological-critical one), Ranke was often credited with raising history to a science.

3. Ranke’s History of England and the writing of Irish history

The introductory volume of Ranke’s History of England (1859–1868 and 1875) surveys English history from the time of the Romans to the early seventeenth century emphasising Henry VIII, the Reformation and the struggle between Queen Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots. The second volume covers the reign of Charles I, his problems with Scotland and parliament. The civil war including the rebellion in Ireland and the execution of Charles I are the main themes of the third volume. Volume four examines the period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, the conflict between parliament and Charles II, the restoration of the Anglican Church and the formation of a new constitution. The fifth volume deals with the emergence of Whigs and Tories and the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688. The sixth volume looks at the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with the
main focus on the years between 1688 and 1691 and the reign of William III. Events in Ireland between 1688 and 1691 were treated by Ranke as fundamental to the further development of the “revolution” and they cover almost half of the book dealing with this crucial period. Ranke concludes his work in the seventh volume with a short summary of the reigns of Anne, George I and George II, and concludes in 1760. The seventh and eighth volumes contain a selection of documents in different languages that Ranke found relevant to English history, and which derived from archives all over Europe.

In his first work History of the Latin and Teutonic nations, Ranke was already aware of the national division within Ireland. Referring to David Hume’s History of England, he mentioned that Henry II “brought it to pass that henceforth two nations have lived together in Ireland—the native Irish, the subjected, and the Anglo-Germanic, the dominant. The English, if not first brought over, were certainly established there by him” (Ranke, 1909, p. 10). Nevertheless, it would take further research before Ranke would consider writing on English history. One of the factors, which provided him with the possibility for his research, was the friendship with Bunsen. Karl Josias von Bunsen, Prussian ambassador to the Court of St James throughout the 1840s and early 1850s, loved England perhaps as much as his own country. He gained a reputation for assisting Germans in London, mostly those who shared his own interest in history and he did much to facilitate research by German historians of England (McClelland, 1971, p. 63). The person who profited most from this was Leopold Ranke.

Ranke recorded that he met Macaulay1 in 1843. Over the years, Ranke’s interest in English history increased and when he completed his History of France (1852–1861), he reconsidered commencing on the English history. Another reason was the success that attended Macaulay’s History of England, published since 1848 (1858).

Ranke disagreed with Macaulay on several matters. H.F. Helmolt suggests that Ranke’s History of England may have been occasioned as a result of competition with Macaulay and the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm encouraged Ranke with the words “Do it, perhaps you will have success!” (Helmolt, 1921, p. 110). Ranke did not only write a work of English history, but also placed his own theory of objectivity and historical correctness into his work. One of the best-known sentences, “I would like to extinguish myself and let the events speak”, is found in the second volume (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. II, p. 1, 1875, vol. I, p. 467). According to Helmolt, Ranke wanted to establish historical truth in its last detail and consequently always wanted to approach this thorough research. Helmolt believed that Macaulay was viewed by Ranke as a historian who presented a one-sided view of English history and Ranke saw it as a moral duty to test his own objectivity (1921, p. 110).

Ranke intended not only to compete with Macaulay but to formulate an interpretation of such completeness that it would not collapse with the addition of further facts. Only at the conclusion of the work is the reader able to view English history in what he saw as its full light and meaning, and he also offered a view of the future. Within Ranke’s history, a clear division of work is recognisable. He dealt with theoretical problems in prefaces, introductions and added reflections, but not in the historical narrative. Ranke maintains the integrity of his narrative, and does not break it up for theoretical reflections.

The special relationship of Scotland and Ireland to England from the time of the Stuarts concerned Ranke, not only because of the specific roles played by the Scots and the Irish in the great turning points of English politics, but even more so because of recurrent efforts mounted from England for “the unification of the three kingdoms” mediated between the insularity of English developments and the generality of their influence (see also Krieger, 1977, p. 276).
Three of Clarissa’s brothers, Charles, John and Robert Perceval Graves, were not only able to establish contacts with other historians in Ireland, they also sent Ranke copies of manuscripts for his History of England. These copies were of high value to Ranke which put him ahead of Macaulay because Robert noted that “Lord Macaulay was told of them, but did not take the trouble to examine them”. Charles Graves especially played an important role in Ranke’s academic career. It was through his auspices that Ranke became an honorary member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1849 and was awarded an honorary degree at Trinity College Dublin in 1865, which was the first of dozens of other honorary awards made to him in the following years throughout Europe. Charles was very interested in Irish antiquarian subjects. He was one of the first to publish on the ancient Irish Ogham script and he started to learn Irish. In the early nineteenth century, it was believed that in learning the Irish language, one could rediscover the Irish nation, but still remain Protestant (Comerford, 2003, p. 134), as was the case with Charles Graves.

From 1858 onwards, Ranke asked Charles for manuscript copies from the Dublin archives and libraries or at least for a list of the kind of material kept there. Even when concluding his history, requests were sent to Ireland. In February 1865, Clarissa wrote that “Ranke wishes if you [Robert] could that you would tell him, how many families of the old Irish nobility still exist and what the titles are”. In the following months, Clarissa thanked her brother Charles for the details of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish noble families, their history, position and estates. It seems that Charles translated Gaelic manuscripts into English and sent them to Ranke in Berlin. From this aspect, Ranke followed the idea of Johann Gottfried Herder, that language is connected with historical interpretation. He believed that thought and language were inseparable and that for the study of a people’s history and culture, a knowledge—and in Ranke’s case the use of original sources—of its language was indispensable.

Ranke, it has been remarked, contributed more to the study of English history in Germany than any other writer, both by his own classic study of early modern England and by training other leading scholars of England, notably Reinhold Pauli (McClelland, 1971, p. 92). The History of England marked the completion of a grand circuit of European history by Ranke. When meeting American historian Frederick Bancroft, he stressed that the completion of his work was only possible due to the great assistance of his wife in his study of English affairs (Adams, 1889, pp. 114, 124).

4. The use of sources for the writing of Irish history

In his preface to the History of England, Ranke wrote that he used “native” presentations of English history for his work as they contained the best insight. He stressed that he used more sources and documents than ever before. Ranke states that documents recording some historical events, particularly of important parliamentary affairs, were missing. In the Public Record Office and in the British Museum, Ranke found unpublished material but, excluding pamphlets, he gives no details about the kind of sources he found there. Ranke stressed the importance of documents by foreign ambassadors, particularly of Venice, Rome and Spain, but also of the Netherlands and Germany. As foreign policy influenced English history also, Ranke tried to use known documents and books as well as unpublished archival material from London, Dublin and the continent (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. I, pp. xiii–xvi, 1875, vol. I, pp. xii–xiv).

Ranke’s footnotes reveal his sources in the form of authors’ names and volume numbers, but in general, he did not list the titles of books. There is no bibliography at the end of his work, but this was not unusual in the nineteenth century. In the footnotes dealing with Irish history, Ranke mentions 38 different sources. More than half of the sources deal with the English “Glorious Revolution” of 1688–1691. He however could not have used those listed 38 books alone. Another way to determine what books he used is to examine his private library, which is now kept at Syracuse University, New York. In total, 211 books dealing with English or Irish history are present, all of which were printed before 1868 when Ranke finished the History of England. The oldest book in his library was published in 1590, and most books were published between 1801 and 1868. Books dealing with English and Irish history, published after 1868, are not present at all. Apparently, Ranke did not update his collection of books after completing his History of England.
A further investigation of the books shows that those written in English were mainly used for his work. It also bears out Ranke’s dictum that one had to use “native” historians if one wished to write the history of another nation (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. I, pp. xi–xii, 1875, vol. I, pp. xii–xiii). Nearly one-third of the books are printed primary sources such as letters and memoirs. Ranke used a large number of general books, and books dealing with the Irish rebellion and with Oliver Cromwell. On the other hand, only 18 of the 211 books dealt with the “Glorious Revolution” and William III, which is the most important and detailed part of *History of England*. It is evident that, for this time period, he used several original documents and some of them are reprinted in his fourth volume under the title “History of the war in Ireland”, which contains reports of the French general Lauzun and extracts from the diary of a Jacobite for the years 1689 and 1690 (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VI, pp. 102–144, 1875, vol. VII, pp. 1–68). Under the chapter “Criticism of the historians”, Ranke discusses the historical works of Clarendon, King James II and Bishop Burnet (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VI, pp. 3–88, 1875, vol. VII, pp. 109–155).

Another work of importance, even though a dictionary, was the *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* (*General encyclopaedia of arts and science*). Under the keyword *Irland*, Ranke found notices of geography and statistics, economic details and a long account of Irish history, language and literature (Hoffmann, 1845, pp. 1–105). Under the keyword *Dublin*, he found a good account of Dublin’s history (Gruber, 1836, pp. 116–120). It is interesting, though, to look at the authors of these two accounts. The entry for *Dublin* was written by Bernhard Eiselen, who was a follower of “Turnvater” Jahn in Germany, to whom Ranke had connections during his early academic career and whose desk he bought in the 1820s, using it to write all of his books until the end of his life. Johann von Lappenberg wrote the account on *Irland*. Lappenberg was, in the early 1830s, interested in Britain’s Anglo-Saxon heritage. He conducted valuable literary and analytical studies of the sources, which were printed at the end of each volume. Lappenberg was the first German to seriously occupy himself with English history prior to 1154, and introduced thoroughness as well as Ranke’s source criticism into the field of English historical research (Thompson, 1962, pp. 345–349). Ranke received a copy of the keyword *Irland* by Lappenberg, probably in thanks to Ranke for tutoring him. This work certainly influenced Ranke’s account of the Irish economy. A little mark can be found on page 87, a sentence dealing with the prohibition of marriage between Catholics and Protestants. This sentence can be found indirectly again in Ranke’s work in connection with the Anti-Catholic policy of William III in the late 1690s (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VI, p. 469, 1875, vol. VI, p. 217).

In his younger years, Ranke would quite often underline the text or add notes on the top or bottom of the pages of his books. In his later years, this became quite rare. Nevertheless, there are still a number of books in his library which contain his notes. Some of them are only underlined, have added notes, dates or corrections of grammar. Sometimes, the reader can find a row of numbers where Ranke tried to sum up troop sizes and verify if they tally. Even though they are merely corrections, these notes demonstrate what Ranke considered to be important when he read the books. In the following paragraphs, I will look at some details.

The two-volume work with the title *The Earl of Strafforde’s letters and dispatches: with an essay towards his life* published in 1739 has a number of underlinings (1739). In January 1638, Wentworth reported the developing economy of Ireland in a paragraph that Ranke marked with a cross: “The Trade increaseth daily, and the Land improves mightily, I dare say all Men’s Rents a third Part better than when I set first Footing on Irish Ground, and very clearly will still grow, if Peace continue” (Earl of Strafford, 1739, vol. II, p. 270).

The passage has some importance, as Ranke stressed Thomas Wentworth’s work on the Irish economy: “Wentworth bequeathed to the Irish no contemptible monument of his autocratic sway. He founded their linen manufacture, in the first instance at his own expense, with the definite expectation that it would form an inexhaustible source of wealth for the country Wentworth has left a strong monument of autocracy for the Irish” (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. II, p. 54, 1875, vol. II, p. 222). Ranke described the manner in which Ireland was ruled by Wentworth (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. II,
It seems that Ranke had quite a positive picture of Wentworth, which he may have gained from this work. He mentioned Wentworth’s strong will and his use of sharp words, his deep Protestant faith and his interest in increasing the economic strength of Ireland. Although his political system of “reward and punishment” is regarded as the only means of ruling Ireland in order to give the king absolute control and power over it, Ranke does not criticise this system but he placed Wentworth in the overall context of British history (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. II, pp. 217–219, 222, 377–378, 1875, vol. II, pp. 50–51, 54, 183–184).

Another important work for Ranke was Eugène Sue’s, *Histoire de la Marine Francaise*. This work was quoted by Ranke and has a number of marked passages relating to Ireland, especially in volume four. The first mark notes James II’s dilemma when William of Orange landed in Ireland, whether to resist or burn Dublin or whether to lay waste to the entire country and retreat region by region which would destroy any functioning infrastructure. Burning Dublin seemed too cruel to James II, so he decided to resist (Sue, 1836, vol. IV, p. 332). 9 Drogheda is mentioned in connection with his resistance and Ranke corrected the spelling of “Drohada” (1836, p. 332). Another correction is found in connection with a bridge over the river Boyne, “pont de Selen”, where Ranke noted “Slaine” [Slane] beside it (1836, p. 332). Further down the text, another word is underlined, again a bridge: “d’Oldebridge” (1836, p. 332). The defence of “Oldbridge” is mentioned in Ranke’s work and his footnote corresponds with the underlined “Oldebridge” (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VI, p. 170, 1875, vol. IV, p. 607).

A large number of marks occur in *Oliver Cromwell’s letters and speeches*. All of the marked passages deal with events in 1649 and 1650. The first marked letter dates to September 1649, and the marked passage deals with Cromwell’s treatment of the Irish, saying, “that softness without rigour, rigour as of adamant to rest upon, is both sloth and cowardly baseness; that without justice first, real pity is not possible, and only false pity and maudlin weakness is possible” (Cromwell, 1857, vol. II, p. 47). In another of Cromwell’s letters, two sentences are double marked: “Sir, you see the work is done by a Divine leading. God gets into the hearts of men, and persuades them to come under you” (1857, vol. II, p. 90). There are no indications that Ranke used these notes, but they may well have influenced his personal condemnation of Cromwell’s storming of Drogheda in 1649 (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. III, p. 33, 1875, vol. III, pp. 347–348).

Ranke’s Manuscript Collection in the State Library of Berlin10 contains a large collection of transcripts which he copied in archives. The problem with most of the manuscripts is that the original location of the manuscripts is not always noted. Few of the copies are in Ranke’s hand because he had a variety of people copying for him. He had a large collection of documents concerning Charles II and James II, but no further dates are given.11 A number of reports of the French ambassador, Sabrians, written in French are documented for the years 1644 and 1645.12 Important copies of documents on Oliver Cromwell were made by Nicolas E. Hamilton in the British Museum in 1857.13 Another collection, in French, contains letters of M. de Grignon from 1646 to 1648.14 An important collection contains the letters of Lord Clarendon, which Ranke probably used for his assessment on Clarendon’s work in his appendix (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VII, pp. 109–136, 1875, vol. VI, pp. 3–28), some of which dealt with the Irish situation in the 1660s.15

Another collection of documents was copied in Brussels and contains reports of the Spanish ambassador, Ronquillo, for the years 1674 to 1689.16 The collection of reports of Bonnet for the years 1685 to 1701 is two inches thick17 and was used by Ranke in his assessment in the appendix (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VII, pp. 155–195, 1875, vol. VI, pp. 45–87). An interesting extract from 1688 is written in English and deals with “Father Peter’s” confession to the French king, mentioning Ireland and giving an account on the military and religious situation of England.18 Detailed accounts were copied from
The Hague, Netherlands, by a local archivist. Dr. van der Wulp documented the military situation and battles in Ireland for the years 1689 and 1690 in English, French and Dutch. One of the most valuable reports represents the fragment of a Jacobite Diary from 1689–1690, which was copied in Cheltenham in the archive of Sir Thomas Philipps and is probably written in the hand of Ranke’s son Friduhelm.

Other major items in Ranke’s Manuscript Collection, all copied in Cheltenham, were the letters of the earl of Nottingham, (1690–1693), French documents about the war in Ireland, 1689–1697, and letters of Lord Godolphin from the year 1695. Further to this there is a collection of letters by Mr. Gard from 1697, all copied in the Public Record Office in London. These deal with discussions in parliament about the size of the English army. These discussions appear in Ranke’s work with the same army numbers (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VI, pp. 428–429, 1875, vol. V, pp. 187–188), but in the manuscripts Ireland is mentioned as receiving 10,000 soldiers, a figure that might increase.

5. The composition of Irish history

When Ranke wrote his History of England, there was no contemporary history of Ireland available to him based on critical archival research (Figures 5 and 6). He wrote his work before the Public Record Office of Ireland was established in 1869 (Connolly, 1999, p. 467), and he had to make do with a short visit to the archives in the Custom House and at Dublin Castle. The contents of the English and Irish Public Records Offices only became fully available to scholars after 1870 with the publication of their contents. Ranke possessed a copy of Thomas Leland’s History of Ireland from the invasion of Henry II (Dublin, 1773), which is noted as being more balanced than earlier Protestant histories, but its treatment of 1641 remained very polemical (Connolly, 1999, p. 313).

Ranke’s only current framework of Irish history was that provided by Macaulay. Ranke was effectively forced to create his own narrative of Irish history. The two sources published in his appendix relating to Irish history 1688–1690 were printed for the first time. His assessment of
Clarendon was also important for the light it shed on the years between 1641 and 1650, even though Ireland is not specifically mentioned.

By looking at different historians, a change can be noticed in the writing of Irish history—the use of sources and their interpretation as well as the interpretation of events themselves. English history written in the nineteenth century was strongly marked by a polemical element. English historians did not write “objective” history, as Ranke required. In England, history was a form of political writing, the historian wrote either as a Whig or a Tory, as a Catholic or a Protestant. The discussion of Home Rule influenced many historians from 1870 onwards (see also Richardson, 1977, pp. 52–73; Mc Cuarta, 1993, pp. 173–186). Furthermore, English historical writing was strongly marked by accounts of individual historical “characters” and the importance of heroic individuals, in the hope to “capture the spirit of the age that created that individual” (Jackson, 2004, vol. I, p. 505).

Comparing the two works of Macaulay and Ranke, a number of differences can be found. Macaulay regarded the Irish civilisation as inferior to English: “The new settlers were, in civilisation and intelligence, far superior to the native population” (Macaulay, 1858, vol. I, p. 109). The creation of one nation between the English and Scottish population had already been reached, while the melding together of the English and Irish races still had to be undertaken (Macaulay, 1858, vol. I, pp. 134–135). The description of Irish society in his 12th chapter (Macaulay, 1858, vol. IV, pp. 134–255) showed the Irish situation as being historic, which meant, in his understanding, that their behaviour could be changed and a positive development of civilisation could take place. He believed that the Irish possessed no morality and had a lack of strength of character. The best example he gives is the Act of Attainder from 1689, which was described by him as a “law without a parallel in the history of civilised countries” and being of “reckless barbarity” (Macaulay, 1858, vol. IV, pp. 224, 226). Ranke, by contrast, has no colourful descriptions of Ireland at all. He treated the country with understanding and respect. Although his narrative of the siege of Londonderry 1688–1689 (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol.
VI, pp. 107–114; 1875, vol. IV, pp. 556–560) may indicate that Ranke wrote history from the victor's perspective, the besieged do not get a better moral treatment and their situation is not portrayed as a victorious one from the start due to the flight of commander Lundy (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VI, pp. 108–110, 1875, vol. IV, pp. 557–558).

Macaulay has the tendency to reduce the religious difference in Ireland to a mere matter of politics. He expected that the Irish religious identity would gradually disappear with the erosion of Irish national identity. Ranke, on the other hand, recognised religious conflict as a historical phenomenon and explained it as part of mankind’s deepest identity as a community.

There are also differences between the two historians in the way they arrange their narratives. For instance, the manner in which they describe the first military actions in Ireland, the 12th chapter of Macaulay and the 6th chapter in the nineteenth book of Ranke’s work (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VI, pp. 106–117, 1875, vol. IV, pp. 555–564). Both had more or less the same source materials but Macaulay wrote with the benefit of hindsight, whereas Ranke tried to write as if the future was still open and undetermined. While Macaulay finished with the image of James II fleeing after the battle of Newton Butler (Macaulay, 1858, vol. IV, pp. 254–255), Ranke indicates that this is too early and finished, instead, with the boost of confidence of the Irish. In his last paragraph of this chapter, Ranke writes that Scotland was temporarily neutralised and James II had even an advantage in Ireland and, with French help, also master of the sea. England was weakened because of disagreements of the parties in parliament with their new government (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. VI, p. 117, 1875, vol. IV, pp. 563–564).


Both historians realised that the battle of the Boyne represented the final stage of a series of events forming the “Glorious Revolution”. For Ranke, it was the final stage of the battle between France and Europe, Catholicism vs. Protestantism, England vs. the other two states of the British crown, Scotland and Ireland, of James II and William III, or, in his own words, “the great religious and political strife in which Europe was engaged found its fullest expression in Ireland” (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. IV, p. 556, 1875, vol. VI, p. 107).

Ranke must be given credit for publishing primary sources. The critical examination of sources and the critical appraisal of the reasons for the 1641 rebellion are features that set his history accounts apart from earlier writers. Ranke thought that the Irish had the right to rebel in 1641 because of their situation and national feelings. Only when writing about the storm of Drogheda 1649 does Ranke fall back on literary style and condemn in harsh words the fanaticism of Cromwell and his belief in carrying out the Justice of God (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. II, p. 208, 1875, vol. III, p. 33).

It has also been realised that the denunciation of Ranke’s work as a history of the victors is unfair to him because he only tells us what happened: every loser is able to become the victor in time, and only time is the permanent victor. Nations come and go, everybody gets their chance, everybody reaches the top of the mountain of history and power. It is suggested that in the case of Ireland, it
had been at the top of civilization during early Christianity, though not a power in political terms. While struggling against England, Ireland may have lost the main battles of the seventeenth century, and Great Britain may have become a world power, but Ranke’s positive treatment of the Irish makes these developments relative because the Irish might rise successfully at a later time. As Ranke regarded each epoch and each nation and its people as unique entities, it also meant that states would embody positive values. And this also means, in the words of Benedikt Stuchtey, that “in this way, history makes sense, but as a result, historiography acquires an ethical relativism if all historical phenomena possess their own value” (Stuchtey, 2004, p. 926).

6. The understanding and definition of the Irish nation
In previous works (Mommsen, 1954, pp. 95–115; Vierhaus, 1957, pp. 57–71), it has been pointed out that Ranke uses the word “Volk” (people) negatively. The people are a crowd, an unwilling mob in contrast or opposition to king and parliament. In the case of Ireland, however, “Volk” is used positively—the people are understood as to be the whole population of Ireland (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. I, p. 507, vol. II, p. 505, 1875, vol. I, p. 387, vol. II, p. 284). Sometimes, Ranke uses “Leute” for Irish people, in general less respectfully than “Volk”. In the case of the Irish Rebellion of 1641, he uses “Leute” very negatively, but when referring to Cromwell’s execution of the garrison in Drogheda, the word is used positively, with respect and sympathy (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. II, p. 511, vol. III, p. 346; 1875, vol. I, p. 288, vol. III, p. 33).27

The word “fatherland” (Vaterland) is not often found in Ranke’s works. Previous authors mentioned that, in the case of England, he translated the English word “kingdom” as Vaterland (Mommsen, 1954, pp. 95–115; Vierhaus, 1957, pp. 57–71). Once this word is used for the “fatherland’s property”, which the Irish wished to have returned, it is suggested that it was used in the sense of “ancestral land” (Ranke, 1859–1868; vol. VI, p. 84, 1875, vol. IV, p. 537),28 and indicated Ranke’s awareness that land ownership was a great national issue of identity and autonomy in nineteenth-century Ireland (Dooley, 2004, pp. 2–3).

The use of the word “nation” (“Nation”) has surprising connotations in this work. Previous scholars (Mommsen, 1954, pp. 95–115; Vierhaus, 1957, pp. 57–71) suggested that the word does not mean unity of the state but of the population itself. In other words, it is used to express national feeling as well. In the case of Ireland, Ranke makes it clear that “nation” covers not only its population, but also the unity of the state and the Catholic Church. Church and state/people are always one. In the wars against England, the Irish nation fought against English units (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. I, p. 457, 1875, vol. I, p. 345).29 For Ranke, it was always the Irish nation that fought, whereas with England or Scotland, it was the troops that fought. In these cases, England was not seen as a nation or another unity (Ranke, 1859–1868; vol. I, pp. 457, 464, 586, vol. II, pp. 505–506, 510, 1875, vol. I, pp. 345, 349, 422, vol. II, pp. 208, 213).

Ranke recognised Ireland as a nation. He probably realised during his studies of Irish history that the island of Ireland had been recognised as a single political entity throughout most of its history (Comerford, 2003, pp. 14–15). As already mentioned, he regarded the “nation” of Ireland in a different way than expected. States exist, but they do not cease to exist like epochs (Hardtwig, 1986, p. 35), and the “nation” of Ireland as a distinct political entity had been well established by the twelfth century. For Ranke, nations could only establish themselves if people shared the same tradition and interests and formed, thereby, some kind of collective identity. This can only happen over a long period of time within which this collective identity and institutional structures grow “naturally” over time. A collective identity cannot be created either with a revolution or by the annexation or union of two different nations because the “naturally grown identity”, or as Ranke formulated it, the “God given system”, would have been destroyed (Hardtwig, 1986, p. 35; Kemiläinen, 1968, pp. 65–67). This is the reason he thought of the nation as, to use the words of H.W. Smith, a “mysterious something” that “precedes every constitution” (Smith, 2004, p. 248).
Based on the ideas of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and G.W.F. Hegel, the nation, or state, was seen in German historiography as an ethical entity and was ranked above the individual and the idea of the social contract. It was therefore concluded that nations would pursue their own destiny, possess their own particular historical laws and would be distinguished from each other by the role of the Weltgeist (Stuchtey, 2004, p. 508). In contrast to this, Alexander von Humboldt, Friedrich Carl von Savigny, Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Ranke emphasised the significance of each particular age, the uniqueness of its culture and its independence from previous and subsequent periods. As Ranke put it, each age was immediate to God “implying that there was not necessarily a teleological link between past, present and future” (Stuchtey, 2004, p. 508). However, in the words of Stuchtey, “the understanding of the past, or an accurate empathy for it, could help as a guide to the present if the historian could identify historical trends that were part of a continuity” (Stuchtey, 2004, p. 508).

Charles Breuning gives a good description of what was understood as a nation in the nineteenth century. The word nation was not new. The Latin term natio, meaning “tribe” or “race”, dates from the era of the Roman Empire. In central Europe, the “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation” had been known by that name since the fifteenth century. But these early uses of the word differ significantly from the modern concept of nationhood. In medieval and early modern Europe, the term nation denoted, at most, an amorphous linguistic and cultural community. In the modern era, by contrast, the “nation” is seen as a political entity consisting of the entire native population living within a contiguous and bounded territory (Breuning & Levinger, 2002, pp. 203–204). This was what Ranke understood. He did not share the Hegelian understanding of “one nation—one land—one language” when he spoke of Ireland (Blanning, 1996, 2002). He never stressed the importance of the Irish language. The unity of the people, their shared Catholic religion and traditions, and the island as a boundary for the nation were indications enough for Ranke that it was a nation.

7. Ranke’s understanding of Irish history in contrast to the romantic views
With this view of the Irish nation, the question arises of how Ranke placed the Protestants as a possible part of this nation. Were they at all a part of the Irish nation? Or is there a possibility that Ranke was influenced by another discussion of Irish origin—the Celts?

The work responsible to start the European cult of things Celtic, historically and culturally, was The works of Ossian (1765) published by Macpherson (1765), a Scottish man of letters. Ossian was a Gaelic warrior and bard, who was supposed to have lived in the third century AD. However, when challenged, Macpherson could not produce the manuscripts he said he had used. It seems he took his material from certain oral ballads and his own vast imagination (see Chapman, 1997, pp. 120–122). The work was nevertheless an instant success in Britain and on the Continent: it figured prominently in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (1774) and inspired a number of famous German poets, such as Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and Johann Gottfried Herder. Several historians dealt with the Celtic historic tradition and constructed a connection between the Celts in Britain, Ireland and the Continent, especially in France. One of these historians was Francois Guizot, who noted in his History of England the connection between the British Celts and the French Gauls (Guizot, 1877, pp. 1–3). His description of druids, who “were standing, clothed in their long white robes, [...] their heads shaved, their beards long” (Guizot, 1877, p. 10), followed the usual Romantic description.

In contrast to Ranke, the French historian Jules Michelet followed the more Romantic idea that the historian should reflect on the past in its totality, whereas Ranke preferred to distinguish between the historical ages and also did not believe in a grand scheme or even in the project of progress. Michelet believed in history as the history of humanity moving towards the values of the French Revolution, whereas Ranke believed that history possesses the means of opening our eyes to moral forces inherent in the past and present (Stuchtey, 2004, pp. 925–926).

Over time, the Irish developed to a point of being typically Celtic. This is not because of the fact that the Irish are pure Celtic—especially after invasions of Vikings, Normans and English—but
nineteenth-century Irish nationalism formed this. So Ireland became Celtic, not because the Irish were Celtic, but the Irish wanted to be Celtic. And for the nationalists, this was essential to form a different identity in opposition to the colonial power of England (Eluere, 1994, pp. 175–176).

Ranke on the other hand did not follow this understanding of Celticism. He would only consider materials which he thought to be true and which were reliable. It also indicates that he simply did not bother to investigate further into the Celtic traditions and history; documents were scarce and could not deliver him a proper foundation. Due to his previous studies on European powers, Ranke was certainly aware of the fact that the definition of a Celt as someone who speaks, or whose recent ancestors spoke, a Celtic language was an eighteenth-century innovation, and it was wrongly applied to the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland (Collis, 2003, pp. 223–224). Ranke knew very well that the word “Celtic” did not stand for a nation, but a language group which opposed the Germanic one. There are many indications that the English had connections to the German people and their Germanic language, but Ranke would have never considered the English and Germans as being one nation. According to this, it indicates that he found it plausible that the “native” people were Catholic and should form their own nation viewing the English Protestants as invaders. Further to this, Ranke stressed that in 1641 “the Catholics of the old settlements viewed themselves as natives” (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. II, p. 506, 1875, vol. II, p. 284). Definitely from this point, Ranke does not differentiate between the Irish and Old English anymore. The term “Celtic-Irish” used by him from the 1850s has to be understood as “Gaelic-Irish”.

But there are also other indications that Ranke knew very well how to deal with the national question. He mentioned, in relation to James I, a rewritten genealogy referring to the Milesian kings (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. I, p. 507, 1875, vol. I, p. 387). Although he did not go into further details, it shows his knowledge of Gaelic-Irish origins, which was well known and publicised in the mid-nineteenth century. Probably because of his wife’s knowledge, Ranke did not bother to check the truth behind this myth (Comerford, 2003, pp. 51–65; Murray, 2000, p. 27). Another indication of his awareness of Irish identity throughout the centuries, which was undoubtedly influenced by his wife Clarissa and her brother Charles Graves, was that the Irish called the English “Saxons” in Gaelic sources (Comerford, 2003, pp. 56–57; Ranke, 1859–1868; vol. II, p. 506, 1875, vol. II, p. 285). Ranke may have become aware of the works of Philip O’Sullivan Beare (c.1590–c.1634), who declared, “all the Catholics of Ireland, irrespective of background, should be called Irish” (Comerford, 2003, p. 59). It is from him that Ranke might have got the idea and he emphasised this designation in his work when he wrote about Irish rebellions and revolts in the seventeenth century. In the case of 1641, Ranke put this provocatively into a question when assessing the reasons for the Irish revolt: “No doubt the Old Irish antipathy of the natives against the Saxons was stimulated thereby; how could it be otherwise?” (Ranke, 1859–1868, vol. II, p. 284, 1875, vol. II, p. 506). And in the same paragraph, the aims of all Catholics—Old English and Gaelic-Irish origin—meld together into one, and indirectly—in Ranke’s view—the Catholic nation was born.

8. Conclusion
In the History of England, Irish history was treated differently from Scottish or English history. On several occasions, Ranke demonstrated a position supportive of the Irish, especially concerning the treatment of people at the storming of Drogheda in 1649. This is striking when compared to the fact that previous scholars stressed the religiously “Protestant” nature of Ranke and his sympathetic empathy with the Protestant cause. Although in some cases of English history this Protestant “support” shines through, for instance in the victory of Queen Elizabeth I over the Spanish Armada, in writing Irish history Ranke showed open support for the Irish and their Catholic cause. His use of language was also distinctive, with words like “nation” and “people” being used differently in relation to Ireland and England; these indicate that Ranke was more supportive of the Irish than the English.

There is also a difference in the use of sources. Contrary to Macaulay, who did not include Gaelic sources, Ranke tried to include them as much as possible and he constantly requested his relatives to search in archives. Manuscript excerpts such as “The Jacobite Diary” found their way into the
appendix. For this and other documents, like the accounts of Count Lauzun, Ranke deserves credit for the selection and publication of such sources.

He did not approach English and Irish history in the same way nor did he treat them “objectively”, to use the word that his disciples applied to him. He was certainly not dispassionate when he harshly condemned Cromwell’s actions at the storm of Drogheda. Ranke endeavoured, however, to write with detachment. This led him to try to explain why it was that nineteenth-century Ireland was characterised by a large Catholic majority ruled by a small Protestant minority. Unlike Macaulay, Ranke did not use the past in order to justify this situation. Instead, he used the past to understand it. In fact, Ranke is one of the first historians who tried to explain a number of Irish events that were dealt with in a polemical way in England, until the end of the nineteenth century. When writing Irish history, Ranke wrote not only the history of Ireland itself, but also the history of Ireland in a British and European context.

His understanding of the Irish “nation” is interesting. He makes it clear that “nation” did not mean only its population, but also the unity of the state and the Catholic Church. Ranke did not follow the Hegelian understanding of “one nation—one land—one language” but, in the case of Ireland, he viewed the unity of the people, their shared Catholic religion and traditions, and the island as a natural boundary, as a nation. He was not influenced by the Celtic discussion on the Continent. The use of Gaelic descriptions of the English—“Saxons”—and the mythical traditions of Ireland indicate Ranke’s deep knowledge of Irish history. The complexity of the conception of Ireland as a political entity separate from England came to him with the help of his Irish-born wife Clarissa and her relatives, although he had some knowledge of it in the 1820s and 1830s.

The case study has also shown the influence of Clarissa in the understanding and composing of English/Irish history by Ranke. In no other work can this influence be found. This is insofar significant as it shows how much the acclaimed objectivity of Ranke could be influenced in his historical writing.

Ranke’s role in the writing of Irish history has been largely neglected by Irish and non-Irish historians alike. His writing lies in the Continental tradition of rationalism and realism, in contrast to the Irish Romantic approach to history. Though W.E.H. Lecky had a different view of writing history than Ranke, he still continued the new wave of creating modern Irish historiography, which Ranke had begun. Ranke can be regarded as the ancestor of that spirit of “scientific” history which is usually considered to have commenced in Ireland with the publication of Irish Historical Studies in 1938.

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Author details
Andreas D. Boldt
E-mail: Andreas.D.Boldt@nuim.ie
1 German and History Departments, Independent Historian at Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland.

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Notes
2. The letters of Clarissa von Ranke, located at the Ranke Museum Wiehe, Thuringia, Germany, indicate a large amount of documents although she mainly thanks her brothers for the received materials. The copies themselves cannot be found in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin (SBB), which contains the Ranke Manuscript Collection. It is suggested that most MSS on Irish and English history got lost or were destroyed during the Second World War.
5. Reinhold Pauli (1823–1882), German historian. He was the last general interpreter of English history to the educated German public.
6. Eiselen, Ernst Wilhelm Bernhard (1793–1846), German gymnastic pedagogue and follower of “Turnvater” Jahn. After the arrest of John in 1819, he continued the gymnastic and nationalist movement in Germany.
7. Jahn, Friedrich Ludwig (1778–1852), founder of the gymnastic and nationalist movement in Germany. He
was imprisoned 1819–1825 in Prussia as he opposed the system of the Restoration period.

8. Lappenberg, Johann Martin von (1794–1865), German historian.

9. This marked passage sounds frightening as this policy of “burned ground” was used by Hitler and Napoleon when their troops were forced to retreat from Russia with devastating results.

Staatbibliothek Berlin (SBB), Nachlaß Leopold von Ranke.


16. SBB, Nachlaß Ranke, Faszikel 22, Lage 2.


22. SBB, Nachlaß Ranke, Faszikel 26/II, Lage 1.

24. The Irish Home Rule movement was a movement that agitated for self-government for Ireland within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. It was the dominant political movement of Irish nationalism from 1870 to the end of the First World War.

25. Macaulay noted for example that Cromwell “resolved to put an end to that conflict of races and religious which had so long distracted the island, by making the English and Protestant population decidedly preponderant”; in Macaulay (1856, vol. I, p. 134).


27. In Ranke (1875, vol. I, p. 288) it is translated as “men”;

28. In Ranke (1875, vol. IV, p. 537) it is translated as “the soil of their fatherland”.

29. One example are Elizabethan troops which arrive in Ireland and were untrained, so the “Irish” were superior.

30. Certainly Charles Graves knew this work through his own research and the libraries of Trinity College Dublin and his own Irish Academy.

Cover image
Source: Newspaper graphic, August Neumann (Original in their possession).

References


