The discipline of history has a history. Ancient Greeks such as Herodotus and Thucydides demonstrated a fundamentally different view of history than historical writers in subsequent centuries. In each generation or era, such as the medieval period, the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, historical writers reveal shifts in the understanding of history. In the nineteenth century, history began to emerge as a profession when departments of history formed in the universities of Europe and North America and began to train students in methods, approaches and research in history. This paper examines the rise of history as a profession and how the creation of university departments, historical societies and journals shaped the discipline itself.

In some eras, such as the 1500s or 1600s readers looked to history to provide models or examples of virtuous conduct, military strategy or political leadership. The idea of heroes in history even persisted through to the early 1800s, but then attitudes among historical writers began to change. As John Tosh argues

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\text{it was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that all the elements of historical awareness were brought together in a historical practice which was widely recognized as the proper way to way to study the past. This … intellectual movement known as historicism ... began in Germany and soon spread all over the Western world.}^1
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Tosh traces the origin of the historicism to Leopold von Ranke, active at Berlin University from 1824 to 1872.\(^2\) Ranke explained his approach to history in the preface to his first published work. “History has had assigned to it the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of the ages to come. To such lofty functions this work does not aspire.

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Its aim is merely to show how things actually were (wie es eigentlich gewesen)’. This quotation from Ranke’s *Histories of the Latin and German Nations from 1494 to 1514* is one of the most famous lines ever written by a historian about the practice of history. But why did it become such an influential idea?

Ranke believed that historical documents provided the key to understanding the past. He used the development of language from oral to written form to distinguish between prehistory and history. “History cannot discuss the origin of society, for the art of writing, which is the basis of historical knowledge, is a comparatively late invention.” Ranke’s emphasis on the written traces of history would influence generations of historians as they scoured the archives in search of primary sources such as letters, diplomatic records or diaries. But Ranke did not simply believe in accumulating written historical records and extracting facts and events, instead he emphasized the “critical analysis” of these sources. Thus Ranke has been credited with changing the nature of historical inquiry by making the discipline of history as rigorous in its methods as science and yet retaining the “critical and readable” qualities of literary works. As George Iggers has noted: ‘the American Historical Association in 1885 elected [Ranke] as its first honorary member, hailing him as ‘the father of historical science’”.

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6 Iggers, “Professionalization”, 227.


8 Iggers, “Professionalization”, 230.
Bibliography


