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Review of Boldt, A.D. (2019) Leopold von Ranke: a biography
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Andreas D. Boldt, *Leopold von Ranke: A Biography*. London: Routledge, 2019, 379 pp. (cloth).

Over the past fifteen years or so, Andreas Boldt, senior tutor at Maynooth University, Ireland, has produced a steady stream of studies on Leopold von Ranke. A monograph on *The Role of Ireland in the Life of Leopold von Ranke* (2007), based on a wonderful collection of letters between Ranke and his Irish wife Clarissa, was followed by an edition of this correspondence (2012) and a book (2014) that explored the “European orientation” of the Ranke family by tracing their travels across Europe, their networks of correspondence, and the guests that Clarissa received in her salon in Berlin. As this book also discussed formative influences on Ranke’s historiography, while providing extensive summaries of every book that Ranke ever published, it could be read as a series of “prolegomena” to a biography of the German historian. This biography has now appeared – almost 400 pages long, with a scholarly apparatus that shows that Boldt has read virtually every piece of Ranke scholarship that has appeared since Alfred Dove and Eugen Guglia, back in the late nineteenth century, wrote the first biographical accounts of the so-called “father of German historiography.”

The best chapters of this biography are, no doubt, the ones that use Clarissa’s letters, poems, and diaries to shed new light on Ranke’s private life. Long quotations offer fascinating glimpses into a household where husband and wife read William Wordsworth together, Clarissa played the piano, and the birth of son Otto in 1844 was an occasion for presents, family advice on baby food, and a poem for Leopold (“To Otto’s Father”). Drawing on Clarissa’s letters, Boldt can tell in some detail how the Rankes experienced the political upheavals of 1848 and 1849, which visitors attended their salon at Luisenstraße 24a, how much Ranke enjoyed his contacts with the Prussian royal family, and how actively Clarissa and her Irish family tried to get Ranke’s books translated into English,

In sharing these findings, however, Boldt makes surprisingly few attempts to address the questions this material raises. Was Robert Graves, a relative of Clarissa, right in observing that Ranke’s “eminence is rather in intuitive acuity & power of decision than in patient exploring & weighing of all the facts of his subject”? Why did Ranke embark on a months-long archival trip right after the death of his son Albrecht in 1850? If Ranke was hardly involved in the upbringing of his children, what does this tell us about gender roles at the time or, perhaps, about Ranke’s workaholicism? And how important were students such as Georg Waitz, with his well-orchestrated reunions of the “Ranke family” in Göttingen, in making the Berlin historian a historiographical “superstar”? At times, it seems as if Boldt stays too close to his sources to realize that his material raises questions that a biographer might want to address.

Regrettably, Boldt is hardly more convincing when he does take on a serious question: How religious was Ranke? Drawing on the philosopher Philipp Rosemann, a colleague from Maynooth, Boldt makes a huge claim about modern philosophy being unable to shrug off its religious origins. Over against John Edward Toews, who carefully contextualizes the young Ranke’s religious sensibilities in their early nineteenth-century context, Boldt believes that his secularization narrative allows him to downplay Ranke’s religious rhetoric as mere conventionalism. It leads him to argue that Ranke wrote on Luther, at the third centenary of

the Reformation, only because “everybody discussed and celebrated him” and that Ranke’s panentheistic musings about God who dwells and lives in all of history were nothing but occasional rhetoric (“he wrote to a pious brother in his own religious language in order to be understood”). Even if Boldt is not convinced by existing scholarship on Ranke’s religious leanings – and there are good reasons indeed for not mistaking Ranke for a Lutheran pietist – such explaining away does little to increase our understanding of the religious language that permeates Ranke’s prose, especially in his private correspondence.

What does not help either is Boldt’s tendency to identify with his hero. Although this identification is far from complete – Boldt recognizes, for example, Ranke’s lack of generosity in crediting others – it leads him to defend the historian against as many charges as possible. So, according to Boldt, it is wrong to think that Ranke had no eye for social and economic history. “If we want to admit it or not,” he engaged in interdisciplinary research. Ranke wrote as vividly as “the historical novelists” and was as objective as he claimed to be. Negatively, this identification with Ranke is apparent from what Boldt has to say about others. Barthold Georg Niebuhr had the “fanciful” habit of projecting his own views back on Roman antiquity, Walter Scott gave a “false colouring” to history, Francesco Guicciardini wrote “purely for romantic effect,” and Friedrich von Schiller “used history as a political weapon and to make a name for themselves.” So much for good and bad in the world of historical studies.

At this point, readers might be forgiven for adjusting their expectations and reading *Leopold von Ranke: A Biography* as yet another piece of evidence of historians’ inability to historicize a man whose name continues to stir emotions due to the symbolic connotations it has acquired in the historical profession. They will notice with interest how Boldt vindicates Ranke of Eurocentrism (he died before his *Weltgeschichte* had reached “the discovery of the New World”), explains the erotic metaphors that Ranke employed in conveying his enthusiasm about archival findings (“I know from my own childhood that other people would quickly tease with history as being ‘a girl-friend’”), and claims that Ranke, had he lived in our time, would most likely have voted for a green party (because of an 1836 lease contract in which Ranke instructed his tenants how to keep the gardens and grassland that he had inherited from his parents).

So does *Leopold von Ranke: A Biography* live up to its title? As in his previous books, Boldt presents his readers with a wealth of primary source material. Arguably, however, a biography worthy of its subject would require a combination of Boldt’s in-depth research with the interpretive courage and narrative talent displayed by, for instance, Dominik Juhnke in his German-language *Leopold von Ranke: Biographie eines Geschichtsbesessenen* (2015) – a book that is not without flaws, but presents a portrait of Ranke that is as vivid as it is coherent. It seems unlikely, though, that the two will be able to join forces, given that Boldt ends his book with a bitter, not to say hostile polemic against the 31-year-old newcomer. So, for now, readers will have to content themselves with what Boldt does offer: an intimate family portrait based on rich archival material.

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