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978-1-108-02209-5 - A History of England: Principally in the Seventeenth Century, Volume 1

Leopold von Ranke

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German historian Leopold Von Ranke (1795–1886) is well known for pioneering the modern historical method which advocates empiricism, rather than a focus on the philosophy of history. Emphasising the importance of presenting history exactly as it happened, Ranke asserted that different eras need to be understood in their own contexts rather than in relation to each other: history should not be regarded as one long, teleological narrative. These principles of writing history, established in earlier publications, are all evident here. Originally published in eight volumes between 1859 and 1869, Ranke's history, 'principally in the seventeenth century', was first published in English as a six-volume history by the Clarendon Press in 1875, the mammoth task of its translation distributed among eight Oxford dons. Volume 1 prefigures the events of the seventeenth century: starting with the early Britons, Ranke summarises English history up to the early years of Charles I.

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A History of England

Principally in the Seventeenth Century

VOLUME 1

LEOPOLD VON RANKE



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A

HISTORY OF ENGLAND

PRINCIPALLY

IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

BY

LEOPOLD VON RANKE

VOLUME I

Oxford

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1875

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P R E F A C E.

ONCE more I come before the public with a work on the history of a nation which is not mine by birth.

It is the ambition of all nations which enjoy a literary culture to possess a harmonious and vivid narrative of their own past history. And it is of inestimable value to any people to obtain such a narrative, which shall comprehend all epochs, be true to fact and, while resting on thorough research, yet be attractive to the reader; for only by this aid can the nation attain to a perfect self-consciousness, and feeling the pulsation of its life throughout the story, become fully acquainted with its own origin and growth and character. But we may doubt whether up to this time works of such an import and compass have ever been produced, and even whether they can be produced. For who could apply critical research, such as the progress of study now renders necessary, to the mass of materials already collected, without being lost in its immensity? Who again could possess the vivid susceptibility requisite for doing justice to the several epochs, for appreciating the actions, the modes of thought, and the moral standard of each of them, and for understanding their relations to universal history? We must be content in this department, as well as in others, if we can but approximate to the ideal we

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set up. The best-written histories will be accounted the best.

When then an author undertakes to make the past life of a foreign nation the object of a comprehensive literary work, he will not think of writing its history as a nation in detail : for a foreigner this would be impossible : but, in accordance with the point of view he would naturally take, he will direct his eyes to those epochs which have had the most effectual influence on the development of mankind : only so far as is necessary for the comprehension of these, will he introduce anything that precedes or comes after them.

There is an especial charm in following, century after century, the history of the English nation, in considering the antagonism of the elements out of which it is composed, and its share in the fortunes and enterprises of that great community of western nations to which it belongs ; but it will be readily granted that no other period can be compared in general importance with the epoch of those religious and political wars which fill the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In the sixteenth century the part which England took in the work of emancipating the world from the rule of the western hierarchy decisively influenced not only its own constitution, but also the success of the religious revolution throughout Europe. In England the monarchy perfectly understood its position in relation to this great change ; while favouring the movement in its own interest, it nevertheless contrived to maintain the old historical state of things to a great extent ; nowhere have more of the institutions of the Middle Ages been retained than in England ; nowhere did the spiritual power link itself more closely with the temporal. Here less depends on the conflict of doctrines, for which Germany is the classic ground : the main interest

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lies in the political transformation, accomplished amidst manifold variations of opinions, tendencies, and events, and attended at last by a war for the very existence of the nation. For it was against England that the sacerdotal reaction directed its main attack. To withstand it, the country was forced to ally itself with the kindred elements on the Continent: the successful resistance of England was in turn of the greatest service to them. The maintenance of Protestantism in Western Europe, on the Continent as well as in Britain, was effected by the united powers of both. To bring out clearly this alternate action, it would not be advisable to lay weight on every temporary foreign relation, on every step of the home administration, and to search out men's personal motives in them; a shorter sketch may be best suited to show the chief characters, as well as the main purport of the events in their full light.

But then, through the connexion of England with Scotland, and the accession of a new dynasty, a state of things ensued under which the continued maintenance of the position taken up in home and foreign politics was rendered doubtful. The question arose whether the policy of England would not differ from that of Great Britain and be compelled to give way to it. The attempt to decide this question, and the reciprocal influence of the newly allied countries, brought on conflicts at home which, though they in the main arose out of foreign relations, yet for a long while threw those relations into the background.

If we were required to express in the most general terms the distinction between English and French policy in the last two centuries, we might say that it consisted in this, that the glory of their arms abroad lay nearest to the heart of the French nation, and the legal settlement of their home affairs to that of the English. How often have the French, in

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appearance at least, allowed themselves to be consoled for the defects of the home administration by a great victory or an advantageous peace! And the English, from regard to constitutional questions of apparently inferior importance, have not seldom turned their eyes away from grievous perils which hung over Europe.

The two great constitutional powers in England, the Crown and the Parliament, dating back as they did to early times, had often previously contended with each other, but had harmoniously combined in the religious struggle, and had both gained strength thereby; but towards the middle of the seventeenth century we see them first come into collision over ecclesiastical regulations, and then engage in a war for life and death respecting the constitution of the realm. Elements originally separate unite in attacking the monarchy; meanwhile the old system breaks up, and energetic efforts are made to found a new one on its ruins. But none of them succeed; the deeply-felt need of a life regulated by law and able to trust its own future is not satisfied; after long storms men seek safety in a return to the old and approved historic forms so characteristic of the German, and especially of the English, race. But in this there is clearly no solution of the original controversies, no reconciliation of the conflicting elements: within narrower limits new discords break out, which once more threaten a complete overthrow: until, thanks to the indifference shown by England to continental events, the most formidable dangers arise to threaten the equilibrium of Europe, and even menace England itself. These European emergencies coinciding with the troubles at home bring about a new change of the old forms in the Revolution of 1688, the main result of which is, that the centre of gravity of public authority in England shifts decisively to the parliamentary side. It was during

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this same time that France had won military and political superiority over all its neighbours on the mainland, and in connexion with it had concentrated an almost absolute power at home in the hands of the monarchy. England thus reorganised now set itself to contest the political superiority of France in a long and bloody war, which consequently became a struggle between two rival forms of polity; and while the first of these bore sway over the rest of Europe, the other attained to complete realisation in its island-home, and called forth at a later time manifold imitations on the Continent also, when the Continent was torn by civil strife. Between these differing tendencies, these opposite poles, the life of Europe has ever since vibrated from side to side.

When we contemplate the framework of the earth, those heights which testify to the inherent energy of the original and active elements attract our special notice; we admire the massive mountains which overhang and dominate the lowlands covered with the settlements of man. So also in the domain of history we are attracted by epochs at which the elemental forces, whose joint action or tempered antagonism has produced states and kingdoms, rise in sudden war against each other, and amidst the surging sea of troubles upheave into the light new formations, which give to subsequent ages their special character. Such a historic region, dominating the world, is formed by that epoch of English history, to which the studies have been devoted, whose results I venture to publish in the present work: its importance is as great where it directly touches on the universal interests of humanity, as where, on its own special ground, it develops itself apart in obedience to its inner impulses. To comprehend this period we must approach it as closely as possible: it is everywhere instinct with collective as well as individual life. We discern how great antagonistic principles sprang almost

unavoidably out of earlier times, how they came into conflict, wherein the strength of each side lay, what caused the alternations of success, and how the final decisions were brought about: but at the same time we perceive how much, for themselves, for the great interests they represented, and for the enemies they subdued, depended on the character, the energy, the conduct of individuals. Were the men equal to the emergency, or were not circumstances stronger than they? From the conflict of the universal with the special it is that the great catastrophes of history arise, yet it sometimes happens that the efforts which seem to perish with their authors exercise a more lasting influence on the progress of events than does the power of the conqueror. In the agonising struggles of men's minds appear ideas and designs which pass beyond what is feasible in that land and at that time, perhaps even beyond what is desirable: these find a place and a future in the colonies, the settlement of which is closely connected with the struggle at home. We are far from intending to involve ourselves in juridical and constitutional controversies, or from regulating the distribution of praise and blame by the opinions which have gained the day at a later time, or prevail at the moment; still less shall we be guided by our own sympathies: our only concern is to become acquainted with the great motive powers and their results. And yet how can we help recognising manifold coincidences with that conflict of opinions and tendencies in which we are involved at the present day? But it is no part of our plan to follow these out. Momentary resemblances often mislead the politician who seeks a sure foothold in the past, as well as the historian who seeks it in the present. The Muse of history has the widest intellectual horizon and the full courage of her convictions; but in forming them she is thoroughly conscientious, and we might say jealously bent on her duty.

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To introduce the interests of the present time into the work of the historian usually ends in restricting its free accomplishment.

This epoch has been already often treated of, if not as a whole, yet in detached parts, and that by the best English historical writers. A native author has this great advantage over foreigners, that he thinks in the language in which the persons of the drama spoke, and lets them be seen through no strange medium, but simply in their natural form. But when, too, this language is employed in rare perfection, as in a work of our own time,—I refer not merely to rounded periods and euphony of cadence, but to the spirit of the narrative so much in harmony with our present culture, and the tone of our minds, and to the style which by every happy word excites our vivid sympathy ;—when we have before us a description of the events in the native language with all its attractive traits and broad colouring, a description too based on an old familiar acquaintance with the country and its condition : it would be folly to pretend to rival such a work in its own peculiar sphere. But the results of original study may lead us to form a different conception of the events. And it is surely good that, in epochs of such great importance for the history of all nations, we should possess foreign and independent representations to compare with those of home growth ; in the latter are expressed sympathies and antipathies as inherited by tradition and affected by the antagonism of literary differences of opinion. Moreover there will be a difference between these foreign representations. Frenchmen, as in one famous instance, will hold more to the constitutional point of view, and look for instruction or example in political science. The German will labour (after investigation into original documents) to comprehend each event as a political and religious whole, and at the same time to view it in its universal historical relations.

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I can in this case, as in others, add something new to what is already known, and this to a larger extent as the work goes on¹.

In no nation has so much documentary matter been collected for its later history as in England. The leading families which have taken part in public business, and the different parties which wish to assert their views in the historical representation of the past as well as in the affairs of the present, have done much for this object; latterly the government also has set its hand to the work. Yet the existing publications are far from sufficient. How incredibly deficient our knowledge still is of even the most important parliamentary transactions! In the rich collections of the Record Office and of the British Museum I have sought and found much that was unknown, and which I needed for obtaining an insight into events. The labour spent on it is richly compensated by the gain such labour brings; over the originals so injured, and so hard to decipher, linger the spirits of that long-past age. Especial attention is due to the almost complete series of pamphlets of the time, which the Museum possesses. As we read them, there are years in which we are present, as it were, at the public discussion that went on, at least in the capital, from month to month, from week to week, on the weightiest questions of government and public life.

If any one has ever attempted to reconstruct for himself a

¹ *Note to the third edition.*—In the course of my researches for this work the representation of the seventeenth century has occupied a larger space than I at first thought I should have been able to give it; it forms the chief portion of the book in its present form. I have therefore allowed myself the unwonted liberty of altering the title so as to make this clear. Still the representation of the sixteenth century, which is not now mentioned in the title, has not been abridged on this account. The history of the Stuart dynasty and of William III make up the central part of the edifice; what is given to the earlier, as well as the later times may, if I may be allowed the comparison, correspond to its two wings

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portion of the past from materials of this kind,—from original documents, and party writings which, prompted by hate or personal friendship, are intended for defence or attack, and yet are withal exceedingly incomplete,—he will have felt the need of other contemporary notices, going into detail but free from such party views. A rich harvest of such independent reports has been supplied to me for this, as well as for my other works, by the archives of the ancient Republic of Venice. The ‘Relations,’ which the ambassadors of that Republic were wont to draw up on their return home, invaluable though they are in reference to persons and the state of affairs in general, are not, however, sufficient to supply a detailed and consecutive account of events. But the Venetian archives possess also a long series of continuous Reports, which place us, as it were, in the very midst of the courts, the capitals, and the daily course of public business. For the sixteenth century they are only preserved in a very fragmentary state as regards England; for the seventeenth they lie before us, with gaps no doubt here and there, yet in much greater completeness. Even in the first volume they have been useful to me for Mary Tudor’s reign and the end of Elizabeth’s; in the later ones, not only for James I’s times, but also far more for Charles I’s government and his quarrel with the Parliament. Owing to the geographical distance of Venice from England, and her neutral position in the world, her ambassadors were able to devote an attention to English affairs which is free from all interested motives, and sometimes to observe their general course in close communication with the leading men. We could not compose a history from the reports they give, but combined with the documentary matter these reports form a very welcome supplement to our knowledge.

Ambassadors who have to manage matters of all kinds, great and small, at the courts to which they are accredited, fill

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their letters with accounts of affairs which often contain little instruction for posterity, and they judge of a man according to the support which he gives to their interests. This is the case with the French as well as with other ambassadors in England. Nevertheless their correspondence becomes gradually of the greatest value for my work. Their importance grows with the importance of affairs. The two courts entered into the most intimate relations: French politicians ceaselessly endeavoured to gain influence over England, and sometimes with success. The ambassadors' letters at such times refer to the weightiest matters of state, and become invaluable; they rise to the rank of the most important and instructive historical monuments. They have been hitherto, in great part, unused.

In the Roman and Spanish reports also I found much which deserves to be made known to the readers of history. The papers of Holland and the Netherlands prove still more productive, as I show in detail at the end of the narrative.

A historical work may aim either at putting forward a new view of what is already known, or at communicating additional information as to the facts. I have endeavoured to combine both these aims.

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TRANSLATORS' PREFACE.

'THE History of England, principally during the Seventeenth Century,' which is here laid before the reader in an English form, is one of the most important portions of that cycle of works on which Leopold von Ranke has long been engaged. His History of the Popes, his History of the Reformation in Germany, his French History, his work on the Ottomans and the Spanish Monarchy, his Life of Wallenstein, his volume on the Origin of the Thirty Years' War, and other smaller treatises, all aim at delineating the international relations of the states of Europe. His History of England may well be regarded as the concluding portion of this series; for the relations of England, first with France, and then with Holland, eventually determined the course of European politics.

The book however is more than a history of this period, for Professor Ranke, according to his custom, has prefixed to it a luminous and interesting sketch of the earlier part of our history, presented, as all summaries ought to be, in the form of studies of the most important epochs. And at the end of the work are Appendices, which supply not only happy examples of historical criticism in the discussions on the chief contemporary writers of the period, but also a mass of original documents, most of which have never before

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been published. Above all, the critiques on Clarendon and Burnet, and the correspondence of William III with Heinsius, will well repay careful study; and the Appendices throw light on some of the more important details connected with the history of the time, besides shewing the student how a great master has found and used his materials.

The present translation was undertaken with the author's sanction, and was intended in the first instance for the use of students in Oxford. Its publication has been facilitated by a division of labour, the eight volumes of the original having been entrusted each to a separate hand. The translators are Messrs. C. W. Boase, Exeter College; W. W. Jackson, Exeter College; H. B. George, New College; H. F. Pelham, Exeter College; M. Creighton, Merton College; A. Watson, Brasenose College; G. W. Kitchin, Christchurch; A. Plummer, Trinity College. The task of oversight, of reducing inequalities of style, and of supervising the Appendices and Index, has been performed by the editors, C. W. Boase and G. W. Kitchin. Notwithstanding the disadvantages incident to a translation, it is hoped that the work in its present shape will be welcomed by a large number of English readers, and will help to increase the deserved renown of the author in the country to the history of which he has devoted such profound and fruitful study.

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