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The Professionalization of History
by
Clio Chronology

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HIS 2370 The Discipline of History

Saint Mary's University

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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

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 study the past. This ... intellectual movement known as *historicism* ... began in Germany and soon spread all over the Western world.¹

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.

¹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 3rd edn (London: Longman, 0 00 72 119.76 cm-9 0-.2400000 72 119.76 cm BT 41 0 0 41 610 (o)nl-8 .r ubshLy

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