
19. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

EDWARD GIBBON was born in Putney in 1737, the eldest of 7 children and the only one to survive infancy. His father, a wealthy Tory MP, went into seclusion in Hampshire in 1747 when Gibbon's mother died, leaving his son in the care of his aunt and grandfather in the latter's house in Putney. Edward later described his aunt as 'the true mother of my mind as well as my health'. It was she who encouraged him as a sickly child with little formal schooling in his 'invincible love of reading', which he was able to do in his grandfather's library.

At the end of 1748 his aunt opened a boarding house for Westminster School. Gibbon went with her and entered the school in January 1749. But his health deteriorated and he spent most of his early teens at home, studying under various tutors. His appetite for history developed at this time and on a visit to his father he first discovered later Roman history. At 15 his health improved and his father sent him to Magdalen College, Oxford. He disliked Oxford and described the 14 months there as 'the most idle and unprofitable in my whole life'.

While there, he was converted to Roman Catholicism. He announced his decision in a letter to his father, who in great annoyance removed him from Oxford and sent him to Lausanne under the tutelage of Daniel Pavilliard, a Calvinist minister. Here he learned French and after five years 'spontaneously thought' in that language. Within two years he had returned officially to Protestantism, or at least "suspended religious enquiries". In his *Memoirs of my Life* he wrote that "The articles of the Romish creed disappeared like a dream". Lausanne remained his base for five years, but he travelled throughout Switzerland, studying Swiss political institutions.

In 1757, at the age of 20, he met Voltaire, who was "making love to a very ugly niece of about fifty". He himself fell in love with Suzanne Curchod, daughter of the pastor of Crassy, who found his plain appearance 'spirituelle et inguliere' (she later married Louis XVI's finance minister Jacques Necker and became the mother of Madame de Staël). He proposed marriage, but she didn't want to leave Switzerland and his father, who was then in financial difficulties, disapproved because she was penniless. "Without his consent I was destitute and helpless. I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son". Back in England, in 1761 he published his first book, a defence of classical studies entitled *Essai sur l'Etude de la Litterature*, translated into English in 1764 as *Essay on the Study of Literature*. He also served for a time on active duty in the Hampshire militia as a captain under his father.

On his release in 1762 he decided to embark on a tour of Europe. He went first to Paris, where he found the circle of d'Holbach, d'Alembert and Diderot congenial. From there he went again to Switzerland, staying a year at Lau-



sanne, and then on to Italy. It was in Rome, he records, that "on the 15th October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed friars were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind". But it was not until 1772, two years after the death of his father, that he settled in London and began the project.

While writing the work, he was elected to the House of Commons as MP for Liskeard in Cornwall (1774), was appointed Professor in Ancient History at the Royal Academy, and joined Dr John-

son's Literary Club. James Boswell, Johnson's biographer, was not impressed, calling him 'an ugly, affected, disgusting fellow'.

In 1776 the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published and met with an unprecedented success, passing rapidly through three editions. "My book was on every table, and almost on every toilette", he wrote. He was rewarded with two thirds of the profits, amounting to about £1000. Volumes 2 and 3 appeared in 1781, bring to an end the period of the Western Empire. He then went to live in Lausanne in a large house belonging to his friend George Deyverdun and worked on volumes 4, 5 and 6, which were published in 1788.

When the first volume appeared, David Hume wrote Gibbon a letter of congratulation but also included a note of caution: "I was a little curious to see how you would extricate yourself from the subject of your two last chapters. I think you have observed a very prudent temperament; but it was impossible to treat the subject so as not to give grounds of suspicion against you, and you may expect that a clamour will arise". Hume was referring to chapters 15 and 16 on the rise of Christianity. He proved to be prophetic: scarcely a month later Gibbon was aware of the beginning of a hostile reaction among the clerics.

The editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine* (August 1776) accused him of "attacking the Old and New Testament, and their sacred Author, with as much virulence, though more disguised, and with the same weapons, however blunted, that have so often and so openly been used in the schools of Battersea and Ferney". In the October issue a letter from 'a believer' suggested that an acquaintance with Voltaire and Hume had made Gibbon 'easy as to any religion', and had prompted him 'to gild the pill of infidelity, that others might more readily swallow it'. Books soon followed, most notably Richard Watson's *Apology for Christianity* (1776) and Henry Davis's *Examination* (1778). They accused him of manipulating the historical record and merely repeating familiar arguments against Christianity made by infidels over centuries. Gibbon replied in a pamphlet entitled *Vindication of Some Passages in the 15th and 16th Chapters* (1779), which itself has been described as a classic of literary polemic.

So, what was all the fuss about? Well, the tone is set early on, in chapter 2, when Gibbon is describing the 'universal spirit of toleration' in the Roman Empire at its height. He notes, paraphrasing Seneca, that "the various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord".

Now, although he admired Rome's cultural and artistic achievements, Gibbon was not writing a lament for departed imperial glory. It is quite clear that he was the enemy of empire as a political form and favoured a republic. In chapter 49 he writes: "there is nothing perhaps more adverse to nature and reason than to hold in obedience remote countries and foreign nations, in opposition to their inclination and interest". Moreover, he was in favour of the abolition of slavery at a time when other supposedly 'humane' writers were opposed to the anti-slavery movement.

Yet, at the same time, he is not suggesting that the decline of the Roman Empire was an entirely good thing, for it was accompanied by the rise of Christianity, of which he is much more critical. Of course, in Gibbon's time, to deny the truth of the Christian religion was a crime, and therefore many of his criticisms had to be implied rather than stated openly. But there is no doubt that he is, at least partly, ascribing the decline to

Christianity. In the 71st and final chapter, having outlined the decline from the 2nd to the 15th centuries, a millennium and a half of history in a million and a half words, he makes the famous statement: "In the preceding volumes of this History, I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion; and I can only resume, in a few words their real or imaginary connection with the ruin of ancient Rome".

Chapters 15 and 16 of *The Decline and Fall* describe in tones of irony and ridicule the rise of the Christian religion. He refers to 'the dark cloud that hangs over the first age of the church', and adds: "the great law of impartiality too often obliges us to reveal the imperfections of the uninspired teachers and believers of the gospel; and, to a careless observer, their faults may seem to cast a shade on the faith which they professed".

When seeking to explain the rise of Christianity he refrains from any reference to supernatural causes and instead lists 5 main factors: (1) the inflexible and intolerant zeal of the Christians, compared to the Romans, who were pragmatic polytheists; (2) the doctrine of a future life, which had not been available from paganism; (3) the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church; (4) the pure and austere morals of the Christians; and (5) the union and discipline of what he calls the Christian republic. He treats of these causes with considerable sarcasm. In regard to the second cause, the idea that the soul is distinct from the body he calls a 'specious and noble principle', but "when the promise of eternal happiness was proposed to mankind on the condition of adopting the faith, and of observing the precepts, of the Gospel, it is no wonder that so advantageous an offer should have been accepted by great numbers of every religion, of every rank, and of every province in the Roman empire".

In chapter 16, he argues that the persecution of the early Christian martyrs was less severe than it is usually

imagined, and he makes the daring statement that "it must still be acknowledged, that the Christians, in the course of their intestine dissensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other, than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels". He continues that, after Rome's conversion to Christianity "the fabric of superstition which they (the Christian bishops) had erected, and which might long have defied the feeble efforts of reason, was at length assaulted by a crowd of daring fanatics, who, from the 12th to the 16th century, assumed the popular character of reformers. The church of Rome defied by violence the empire which she had acquired by fraud; a system of peace and benevolence was soon disgraced by proscriptions, wars, massacres, and the institution of the holy office".

In chapter 28 he adds another criticism: "in the long period of twelve hundred years, which elapsed between the reign of Constantine and the reformation of Luther, the worship of saints and relics corrupted the pure and perfect simplicity of the Christian model; and some symptoms of degeneracy may be observed even in the first generations which adopted and cherished this pernicious innovation". But it should not be assumed that Gibbon is making an assault merely on Roman Catholicism. For in chapter 54 he also has a go at the reformers and their rigid dogmas of original sin, redemption, faith, grace and predestination, and concludes: "Hitherto the weight of supernatural belief

inclines against the Protestants; and many a sober Christian would rather admit that a wafer is God, than that God is a cruel and capricious tyrant".

Christianity, in Gibbon's view, contributed to the decline of the Empire by making the people less interested in the worldly

here and now and more willing to wait for the rewards of heaven. There was a loss of civic virtue, "the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister", and "the attention of the emperors was diverted from camps to synods". But he does not claim that this was the only cause. Indeed, in the coda to the 3rd volume he gives his famous final verdict: "The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long".

In other words, over and above all other possible factors, such as barbarian invasions, economic decay, political corruption and incompetence, there was the inevitable 'imperial overreach', to use the modern term, which brings all empires down sooner or later. Gibbon was not so naive nor so 'aggressively atheist' as to attribute it solely to religion, but his great work of elegant philosophical history endures not least because it is merciless in exposing erroneous or destructive ideas where appropriate, be they secular or religious. As he wrote, "History is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind". And he was not afraid to trample on sacred cows in order to convey these tragic realities.

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