Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in three instalments from 1776 to 1788, is widely regarded as the greatest work of history in the English language. Starting with the accession of the Roman emperor Commodus in the late second century AD, Gibbon’s work traverses thirteen centuries, encompassing the rise of Christianity and of Islam, the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, and the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. This Companion provides a comprehensive overview of the intellectual roots, contemporary European contexts, literary style and thematic scale of Gibbon’s achievement. Alongside the *History*, it gives an introduction to Gibbon’s other works, including the *Memoirs* he left unfinished at his death and previously unpublished material. Leading international scholars in the fields of classics, geography, history and literature provide a comprehensive account of Gibbon’s monumental account of decline, fall and global historical transformation.


*A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.*
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
EDWARD GIBBON

EDITED BY
KAREN O’BRIEN
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BRIAN YOUNG
University of Oxford
This volume is dedicated to J. W. Burrow (1935–2009), Robert Mankin (1952–2017) and Mark Whittow (1957–2017)
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NOTE ON THE TEXT

All references to Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* are from David Womersley’s three-volume edition (Penguin, 1994). Citations are by volume number and page.
CHRONOLOGY

1737  Born in Putney, the son of Edward Gibbon, MP (1707–70) and his wife Judith (née Porten).

1747  Gibbon’s mother dies. He is cared for by his aunt Catherine Porten. All six of his siblings died in infancy.

1748  Enters Westminster school.

1750–1  A period of nervous illness interrupts his schooling.

1752  Is sent to Magdalen College, Oxford, which he finds intellectually vacant. Pursues his own course of reading, including Conyers Middleton’s account of miracles from the time of the early Christian church.

1753 June  Converts to Roman Catholicism. His concerned father puts him under the care of a Reformed minister, M. Pavillard, in Lausanne.

1753–8  Residence in Lausanne. Pavillard directs a serious programme of reading, noted in Gibbon’s ‘Commonplace-book’, including Pascal, Giannone and a range of European scholars. Becomes fluent in French, attends theatricals and parties at Voltaire’s mansion, acquires a lifelong friend in Georges Deyverdun. Forms an attachment (ultimately forbidden by his father) with Suzanne Curchod. Starts to write the Essai sur l’étude de la littérature, seeking a middle way between philosophic and scholarly approaches to ancient writings.

1754  Christmas day Gibbon returns to Protestantism.

1755  Tours Switzerland.

1755 May  Father marries Dorothea Patton (d. 1796) to whom Gibbon becomes devoted.
### Chronology

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>1758</td>
<td>Returns to family estate in Hampshire. Permits his father to cancel the entail on the estate in exchange for a £300 annuity, giving him a slender financial independence. His father’s finances remain precarious.</td>
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<td>1758–63</td>
<td>Spends part of his time in New Bond Street in London, studies English classics and acquires the <em>Memoirs of the Academy of Inscriptions</em> which later provided some of the scholarly foundations for his history.</td>
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<td>1759 June–1762 December</td>
<td>Serves as Captain in the South Hampshire Militia during the Seven Years’ War. He resumes his commission in 1765, only resigning it in 1770.</td>
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<td>1763–5</td>
<td>Grand tour of France, Switzerland and Italy, unsteadily financed by his father.</td>
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<td>1763 January</td>
<td>Paris, where he is received by leading society hostesses and philosophes such as d’Helvétius and D’Holbach as a man of letters.</td>
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<td>1764 April</td>
<td>Arrives in Italy, learns Italian and sets out for Rome.</td>
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<td>1764 October</td>
<td>‘It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October, as I was musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind’ (<em>Autobiographies</em>, p. 302).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1764 to winter 1765</td>
<td>Tours Naples and Venice, returning via Paris to England.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1765–70</td>
<td>Resumes his social and scholarly life in London and Hampshire, now enlivened by visits from Deyverdun. Joint writings include a literary periodical in French. Engages in a number of his own projects, including an unpublished essay on eastern history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770 November</td>
<td>Death (little regretted) of his father brings a measure of financial independence, with advice from Holroyd.</td>
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Pursues a sociable life in London from his fashionable address near Cavendish Square.

1774

Becomes a member of Samuel Johnson’s Club and is elected MP for Liskeard. He presents as a mainly silent figure in the Commons, aligned to the (broadly Tory) ministry of Lord North. He remains loyal to North during the American conflict from 1775 to 1783, though never a great enthusiast for the war.

1776 February

Volume I (chapters 1–16, culminating in his account of the rise of Christianity) of *The Decline and Fall* printed by Strahan and Cadell, priced 1 guinea. The first print run of 1,000 sells out instantly and three further issues (with some revisions) follow. Extensive praise, including from David Hume.

1776

A wave of published attacks on Gibbon’s treatment of early Christianity, from high churchmen to dissenters. Gibbon responds with *A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters*, vindicating his scholarly probity.

1777 May to December

Paris, where he basks in his new-found fame.

1779

Publishes *Mémoire justicatif*, a work of propaganda for the North government, criticising the French for their involvement in the American war. Appointed to the Board of Trade and Plantations for a much-needed salary of £750 per annum.

1780

Loses his seat in Parliament.

1781

Volume II (up to Theodosius, the last emperor to reign over the western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire) and Volume III (ending in AD 476 and ‘General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West’) of *The Decline and Fall* come out to a more muted reception than the first volume.

1782

Again elected MP, this time for Lymington, but no government sinecures follow.

1783 September

Partly for financial reasons, and partly in fulfilment of a long-held plan, he goes to live with Deyverdun in Lausanne.

1783–7

Completion of the remaining three volumes of *The Decline and Fall*, taking the narrative up to the fifteenth century in the east and in Rome itself, for
Chronology

which he receives £4,000. The ‘joy on the recovery of my freedom’ is tempered with ‘melancholy’ at the conclusion of so great an enterprise (Autobiographies, pp. 333–4).

1788
Celebrates the publication of the final three volumes in London.

1789 July
Death of Deyverdun, a shock to Gibbon.

1789–93
French Revolution: Gibbon is initially sanguine, but increasingly appalled by events in France. Despite its attack on unbelieving philosophes, Gibbon finds much to agree with in Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790). At work on his memoirs and various medieval antiquarian projects.

1793
Returns to England after the death of Lady Sheffield. Suffering from a prodigiously enlarged hiatus hernia, he seeks surgical assistance and thereby contracts peritonitis.

1794 January
Gibbon dies, and is buried in the Sheffield family church in Sussex. Sheffield becomes the executor of his papers.

1814
Sheffield publishes Gibbon’s memoirs as part of an edition of Miscellaneous Works. Sheffield compiles and carefully edits the six MS drafts left by Gibbon into a seamless, marmoreal narrative, Memoirs of My Life.

1895
Sheffield’s grandson sells Gibbon’s manuscripts to the British Museum.

1896
Publication of The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon by John Murray, based on the manuscripts.

1896–1900
Landmark scholarly edition of The History of the Decline and Fall by the Irish classical and medieval scholar J. B. Bury.