Introduction

I

This is the second volume in a series designed to enhance our understanding of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by establishing contexts in which it may be studied. *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*[1] followed the earlier part of his life through a variety of encounters with several forms of Enlightenment, paying attention to ways in which these moved him towards the historian he came to be. The present volume explores the historiography of Enlightenment by selecting – it is important to emphasise that other selections could have been made – a series of authors who wrote Enlightened histories on a grand narrative scale, were known to Gibbon and were important in his own work: Pietro Giannone, François Arouet de Voltaire, David Hume, William Robertson and – somewhat removed from narrative proper – Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. They are considered here not only as resources on whom Gibbon drew or as authorities who may have shaped his writing, but as his peers worth studying in their own right. This volume is therefore an exploration of the intellectual world of the Enlightened historians, akin to Karen O'Brien's *Narratives of Enlightenment*[2] which reached me during the composition of my own work, but leading towards the particular objective of examining Gibbon as a member of this company of historians, intelligible as acting in the context it furnishes. It follows that, with due caution, I treat these writers as establishing norms to which he may or may not have conformed. This is an interpretative device useful to the historian, rather than a historical statement about any pressures to conform which he may have been under.

The principal norm to emerge is that to which I refer by using the term 'the Enlightened narrative'. The historians here studied were all

[1] *EEG*, 1999. [2] O'Brien, 1997.

concerned to write, first, the history of what I further term 'the Christian millennium', covering the eleven or so centuries from Constantine to Charles V in the case of Robertson, or the nine or so centuries from Charlemagne to Louis XIV in the case of Voltaire. This era was in a special sense that of 'barbarism and religion' – a phrase famously used by Gibbon and furnishing the overall title of this series – since it was that in which the Latin-using provinces of the former Roman empire were perceived as dominated by feudal lordships originating with the barbarian invasions of these provinces, and by the ecclesiastical and above all papal jurisdiction over secular affairs exercised by the Roman church in the absence of imperial civil sovereignty. In what might be called its second chapter, 'the Enlightened narrative' proceeded to recount the emergence from the 'Christian millennium' of the political, social and cultural orders in which the Enlightened historians believed themselves to be living and to which they applied the term 'Europe'. Their narratives passed through – without always mastering – the period of the Wars of Religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to recount the emergence of a system of strong sovereign states, both multiple monarchies and confederations, linked together by treaties and commerce to a point where 'Europe' could be considered (despite its wars) a republic or confederation, and practising a reason of state which was an index to their capacity to conduct civil government undisturbed by papal monarchy or confessional anarchy. This system of states was supported by, and might be thought the outward expression of, a cultural system of shared manners, possible only in a deeply commercial civilisation, which cemented the relations between both Enlightened Europeans and European states. The 'Enlightened narrative' thus set itself to be both a historiography of state and a historiography of society, and took as its telos the ideally Enlightened system existing (roughly) between the wars of the Spanish succession and the American and French revolutions. The historians studied in this volume, however, were not under the illusion that this 'Europe' was either unproblematic or unthreatened. The majority of their works were published as or after the escalating war cycle of 1756 to 1763 began to push Europe and European America into what Franco Venturi termed 'the crisis of the *ancien régime*'.[3] They reveal to us, nevertheless, the extent to which this *régime* believed itself to be modern.

The 'Enlightened narrative' thus delineated is intensely Latin or – a

[3] Venturi, 1979, 1984; Litchfield, 1989, 1991.

term I have sought to avoid – 'Western' in its focus and emphasis; it is concerned with the medieval and early modern histories of the successor states formed within the old Roman frontiers, before the expansion of Frankish, Norman, Flemish and Rhenish power east into Germany and Central Europe or west into Britain and the Atlantic islands. There are consequently limitations to its vision with which Scottish historians within our period, or German historians just after it, had to contend; Gibbon himself knew no German and had little sense of Germany as a zone in which history had happened or cultural change was going on. There were two senses, however, in which this 'Eurocentric' history was aware of contacts between 'Europe' and worlds beyond it. The Russian state was believed to have been Europeanised, and to have set out on the conquest of Central Asia as far as the borders of China, leading to the final subjugation of the steppe nomad peoples who had so often invaded Roman and post-Roman Europe, enlarging the meaning of the term 'barbarian' beyond its Gothic and Germanic associations. Secondly, the peoples of the Atlantic coastlands – 'Europe' in its narrowly Latin sense – had embarked on a conquest of the global ocean, leading to commercial empires in Asia, the colonisation of the Americas and the massive forced diaspora of enslaved Africans. The great Enlightened histories of these processes in world history – Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes*, Robertson's histories of America and India – lie beyond the scope of the present volume; but the processes they describe were already transforming the history of Enlightened Europe, by enlarging the controlled rivalry of France and Britain into a contest for maritime empire, and their presence is to be felt even in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.

The 'Enlightened narrative' and its world were therefore changing by the time Gibbon's volumes began to appear in 1776; yet it is not on this account, but for reasons older in the history of western Europe's debate with itself, that the *Decline and Fall* appears exceptional, and even anomalous, in the context furnished by the present volume. On the one hand, it can easily be shown that Gibbon was intensely aware of the movement through the 'Christian millennium' to Enlightened 'Europe', and regarded it as the history in which he was himself living and writing. On the other, it will become clear that he is living in this history but choosing not to write it. Where the 'Enlightened narrative', in every case we are about to study, relates the history of the Christian millennium and the way out of it, the *Decline and Fall* is a narrative of late antiquity and the way into the Christian middle ages. It ceases in 1453 and makes no attempt to go on into the history of modernity (to use the

term 'modern' in our way, which is not Gibbon's). Furthermore, though he presupposes and at times reiterates the history of the Latin middle ages – the history of papacy and empire, French and English monarchy – he deliberately though with many misgivings chooses not to relate it, but to pursue instead the history of the eastern Constantinean monarchy to the capture of its capital by the Ottoman Turks. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* therefore ceases to be the history of the supersession of Roman empire by Roman church – the first movement in every other Enlightened history of Europe – and becomes something else; whatever it was, something Gibbon found great difficulty in carrying to an end.

The advantage of taking the 'Enlightened narrative' as a norm is that it casts a searching light on the series of decisions which Gibbon must at various times have taken with the effect of making the *Decline and Fall* what it is. The history of these decisions was broached at certain points in *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon;*[4] it may have begun as far back as Gibbon's childhood and underwent significant developments at Lausanne and Rome in 1763–4. There ensue more than ten years during which it is difficult to trace his progress towards the condition reached in the opening pages of the *Decline and Fall*, appearing in 1776. The book here presented concludes with a section examining Gibbon's intellectual development during these years, and treating it as a series of decisions leading in directions other than those contained within the 'Enlightened narrative'. Of these the most significant is one not yet considered and perhaps not fully recognised by Gibbon himself even in 1776: the decision that there must be a history of the patristic as well as the papal church, pointing in directions Greek and Arabic rather than Latin. The reasons for this decision do not lie within Enlightenment as conventionally narrated, and this book may come little closer to them than the suggestion that Gibbon himself may have been slow to realise where they were taking him.

II

There is a second theme to be pursued in this book. It is dedicated to the memory of Arnaldo Momigliano, as its predecessor was to that of Franco Venturi; in each case with the intention of honouring the memory of a great historian by continuing the exploration of a problem

[4] *EEG*, pp. 32–3, 40–2, 123–32, 263–7, 270–4, 275–8, 283–91, 303–5.

or thesis first suggested by him. Almost half a century ago, Momigliano proposed that Gibbon's importance in the history of historiography lay in the union he effected between the erudite or antiquarian scholarship derived from the Renaissance and the philosophical historiography we think of as Enlightened.[5] The marriage was not made in heaven; in *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* it was argued at length that Gibbon's earliest and in some ways most philosophical work, the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* of 1762, was a philosophical defence of erudition against a philosophy he thought designed to denigrate it. As Momigliano himself and others after him enquired further into his initial hypothesis, it became increasingly clear that both philosophy and erudition required integration with a third component of the historiographic package: that is to say, with narrative, meaning in the first place the classical narrative of the exemplary actions of leading figures, derived from the Greco-Roman model as interpreted by Renaissance humanists.[6] As the enquiry proceeded, however, the character of narrative itself was seen to change. Renaissance and post-Renaissance philology began the transformation of historiography into an archaeology of past states of society and culture; and not only had the classical narrative to be read into, and interpreted in, the successive contexts which philology presented, but there arose the need of a macronarrative relating how human affairs had passed through this succession – a narrative, as it is termed below, of systemic change. Erudition was a principal actor in these successive reconstructions of past states, but they arose also from the intense controversies of the early modern period between church and church, church and state, state and society, in which each contestant sought to anchor its authority in a different image of things formerly existing; as Adam Smith remarked, it was the controversial and litigious character of modern historiography that differentiated it from ancient.[7] Philosophical historiography, meaning history written in the temper which the eighteenth century termed 'philosophical', commonly aimed to distance itself from controversy of this kind, whether by contemplating it in detachment or by reducing it to narrative of the macronarrative kind, and in all these ways narrative, erudition and philosophy interacted and changed one another's meanings. The strength of the Momiglianan formula lay in the increasing density of its texture.

The formal relations between the three components were sometimes debated, as they were in the Académie des Inscriptions, in Adam

[5] Momigliano, 1955, ch. viii. [6] Hicks, 1996. [7] Below, p. 325.

Smith's lectures at Glasgow, or in the young Gibbon's *Essai* written as a criticism of d'Alembert; but it seems that their history can best be followed through tracing the various genres of historiography as these took shape from antiquity to the early modern period, and enquiring how these genres called for various ways of writing history and understanding what it meant to write it. In this book, then, studies of the major historians preceding Gibbon are introduced by a preliminary chapter or prelude,[8] which examines the diversities of early modern historiography inherited, perhaps as a *damnosa haereditas*, by the historians of Enlightenment, and considers how narrative, erudition and philosophy came to be elements in this inheritance. It is premised, however, that the task facing each historian was the construction of an 'Enlightened narrative', that is to say, a macronarrative of great systemic complexity, tracing what were called *les progrès de l'esprit humain* through the grand sequence of the ancient, the Christian and the philosophical; and that the construction of narrative on this scale, while a task to which philosophy may make profoundly important contributions, is never one which the philosopher as such undertakes. Hume was a philosopher who became a historian; Smith a philosopher who never converted conjectural history into fully narrative civil history; Gibbon a historian who never intended to be anything else and employed philosophy as he had need of it. Momigliano's formula implies that philosophy is one of three components of Enlightened historiography, whose history is therefore not epiphenomenal to the history of philosophy. This book asserts that its history is the history of the narratives which historians have been impelled to put together, and enquires why the *Decline and Fall* is a narrative both like and unlike those we consider its peers.

[8] An earlier and longer version may be found in Pocock, 1996.

PRELUDE

The varieties of early modern historiography

I

The writing of history, an activity which has become central to neo-Latin and post-Latin culture, was in the second half of the eighteenth century still in a pre-modern condition. This did not prevent its being an advanced literary genre and a sophisticated branch of critical enquiry; but the crucial developments that gave it its modern character had not occurred. They may be said to include the growth of a historicist philosophy that made history the condition of human life at all points; the opening of archives that made history the memory of the state and led to the belief that this memory was preserved so fully that an objective enquiry might convert it into truth; and above all, the reorganisation of academic and intellectual life which in the nineteenth century made historians the members of an accredited profession. Gibbon could claim that history was his vocation; but his problems in reconciling the status of a gentleman with that of a man of letters reveal to us that we are still dealing with a world of amateurs and virtuosi, in which established literate elites – churchmen, lawyers, humanists – co-existed and competed with leisured critics and independently operating *philosophes*. As there were a number of ways of being a historian, so there were a number of reasons for becoming one, and as a further consequence a number of meanings the term itself could bear and of intellectual activities it could connote. Though discrete, these activities were not separate; they were coming together in various patterns which defined the *métier d'historien* as it was in the era of Enlightenment; and this is the situation underlying the Momiglianan formula that historiography consisted in a number of activities – narrative, erudition, philosophy – which it was still the historian's task to combine appropriately. There were, then, several species of historiography, which had been formed in the process of singling out various subjects and ways of treating them;

and these subjects came together to define what 'history' was, and to combine the several species in what was still a highly composite genre.

Though 'history' had not become one of the recognised liberal arts, it had its own muse among the Nine and enjoyed a classical status and description. The classical meaning of 'history', which retained authority in the still neo-classical Enlightenment, was that of a narrative; one which related the exemplary deeds, to be imitated or avoided – there were bad examples as well as good – of ruling individuals, displayed in a context of war and government, politics, rhetoric and morality. This narrative might be written by the principal actor himself, but was probably better supplied by a historian who was witness to his deeds and was himself active in the nexus of performance; as a narrative of action, it should be written by one who had been active himself.[1] (Gibbon thought that, as a military historian, it was an advantage to him that he had commanded troops, a disadvantage that he had never seen action.[2]) History was therefore written in and of the present, and only its survival in written form made it a record of the past. As this came to be the case, 'the historian' existed in the past; 'the Roman' or 'the English history' came to mean the aggregate of surviving works written by those like him; and it was a question whether one who studied, edited or rewrote them in the present should be termed a 'historian' at all. When Gibbon was called 'the historian of the Roman empire', the epithet carried, first, the neo-classical connotation that he had outdone the 'historians' of the past according to canons which they and he acknowledged: second, the 'modern' connotation that 'criticism' enabled him to understand their writings, and consequently their world, better than they had themselves. This claim could be described as 'philosophical'; yet the need to make it testifies to the extraordinary authority still exercised by surviving 'narrative'.

These narratives were rhetorical exercises, pronounced for purposes of morality; it might be more important that they should exhibit moral ideals than that they should be true to the facts, yet if that were the issue how had 'the facts' come to be known? Since very early times it had been recognised that there might be more than one account of the same event, and that the historian might have to declare which he took to be true or declare the impossibility of deciding. He now ceased to appear in the role of actor or witness, and became a commentator on other men's

[1] Hicks, 1996, gives the best summary account of this genre.
[2] *Memoirs*, p. 117; *Journal A*, p. 75.

narratives; he might become a critic or a judge, but philosophers might appear and inform him that he knew nothing on the authority of his own intellect. The pyrrhonist controversy of the early eighteenth century was one to which Gibbon was still responding. This was the point, however, at which context made its appearance, as something which might be known independently of narrative and report. The exemplary deeds of the actors in Greek or Roman history were performed by political beings – citizens, rulers, magistrates, kings – existing and acting in contexts of political structure which both regulated and defined the actions they performed. These structures or polities were designed to reconcile highly competitive actions and were themselves highly contestable; they might succeed or fail in their function, and were liable to deliberate or catastrophic change. It therefore happened that the city, as well as the citizen, became a metaphorical actor in the narrative the historian related, and that history became a macronarrative recounting the changing form and fortune of the city as the framework of moral and political action. The historian now became a political analyst or theorist, and could return a different set of answers to the question how he validated the statements his narrative contained.

As history became a narrative of contexts as well as of actions, the moral and exemplary character of the actions related was affected. Ancient rulers and citizens were a warlike set of men, and war was recognised as a domain of the uncontrollable and unpredictable, in which violence occurred in a context of contingency, ruled by fortune. The narrative of action became a narrative of mystery, meaning not only the mystery of random contingency, but the mystery of how decision and action were framed in the face of contingency. Whether action had proved successful or disastrous, that which was exemplary about it was at the same time that which was arcane, formed in the depths of the human heart as it interacted with fortune. Political action, formed in the uncertain and shifting environments of political situations and contested systems, could be viewed in the same way; and at no time was this more true than when political systems disintegrated or became corrupt, so that actions which should secure one result secured another and speech came to bear other meanings than those which it seemed to convey. It was for this reason that Tacitus so often appeared to the early modern and neo-classical mind the greatest of ancient, and therefore of all, historians. He had no rival as an author of narrative at the point where the exemplary became the arcane, and to call him a 'philosophical' historian was less to say that he had rendered the arcane explicable

than that he had plumbed to their depths the moral consequences of seeing it as explicable only in part. 'Reason of state', the narrative of human action in disordered situations, was perhaps ancient historiography's chief contribution to the subsequent notion of sin, and it made this contribution at the point where it asked how far narrative could render explicable the actions which it related.

The classical narrative, still conceived as an exemplary model, retained an extraordinary authority in neo-classical culture down to the Age of Revolutions. It remained a problem for both statesmen and historians that they could not comport themselves according to the ancient model in which they acted in both roles,[3] and with the authority of ancient history there persisted the authority of the ancient model of politics, with its typical narratives of foundation and legislation, virtue and corruption. However, the classical narrative had in fact never been confined to the simple narrative of exemplary actions. It had been also a macronarrative of the foundation and decay of political forms, and part of the 'philosophical' component inherited from Tacitean historiography had been the question how, and whether, the actions of individuals could be made the occasions of moments of systemic change. The narrative of action by citizens had further been subjected to a long series of criticisms: the philosophical critique of citizenship, the Christian critique of ancient values, the monarchical critique of republican government, the critique of virtue by commerce, and most recently the Enlightened critique of monarchy, republic and Christianity all together. The classical model, and the classical narrative which was part of it, owed their extraordinary survival in the eighteenth century to the circumstance that while they were challenged by all subsequent history, they were at the same time means of criticising that history itself, so that one could not write history without entering, for the most part intentionally, into the debates between ancient and modern. A consequence for historiography was the heightening of consciousness of the many phases through which European history had passed since classical antiquity; and there was a link between history as the narrative of classical action and history as the narrative of systemic changes in civilisation. It was not narrative alone, however, that could furnish knowledge of what the phases of the systemic narrative had been.

[3] Hicks, 1996, pp. 14–22.