

KAREN O'BRIEN

Introduction

Gibbon was not born a historian, it was a 'character' he gradually and painstakingly acquired over many years of immense reading and exploratory writing. Towards the end of his life, in his *Memoirs*, the man known to us as the author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) trusted that he had sufficiently acquired 'a name, a rank, a Character in the World' to render his posthumous reputation secure.¹ His background as an English gentleman of good family and dwindling means certainly prepared him for a life of diverse literary pursuits, but less obviously for the extraordinary feats of scholarship and sustained writing demanded by his *History*. His early education, interrupted by poor health, provided him with a philologically grounded knowledge of Roman antiquity and literature, but not with the erudite and encompassing grasp of world history that would underpin his magisterial achievement. Gibbon was, or rather self-consciously became, not an English gentleman of letters, but a writer of the European Enlightenment. He greatly extended the scholarly ambitions and compass of that Enlightenment through his mastery of the great European corpus of classical and medieval erudition that had gone before.

Gibbon was born in 1737, the son of an MP and gentleman farmer, whose wealth had its origins in commerce and whose tendencies were toward dissipation and paternal neglect. His mother died when he was eight, and none of Gibbon's six siblings survived their infancy. He was educated at Westminster School and then at Magdalen College, Oxford, which he found, notoriously, populated with fellows who had 'absolved themselves from the labour of reading, or thinking, or writing'.² Unsupervised, Gibbon's own reading led to a decision to convert to Catholicism, in full knowledge of the severe legal disadvantages this would place him under when of age. Shocked, his father sent Gibbon to Lausanne in the Swiss republic of Bern, where, under the tactful tutelage of Daniel Pavillard, a Protestant Reformed minister, he re-embraced his original faith and suspended his 'Religious enquiries'.³ Neither

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he nor his father greatly insisted upon the sincerity of that faith. Gibbon thereafter spent his remaining four and a half years in Lausanne pursuing an extensive course of reading in ancient and modern literature from the settled standpoint of (as yet undemonstrative, but rigorous) scepticism. His Catholic conversion and recuperation were undoubtedly an important part of Gibbon's intellectual formation, and profoundly shaped his eventual interpretation of Christianity as a historical factor in the decline of the Roman Empire. As Brian Young points out in Chapter 8, 'the journey from Protestantism to Catholicism and thence to scepticism' was 'a familiar itinerary in the intellectual history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe'. It laid the foundations for Gibbon's academic interest in all kinds of theology, and his conviction that dogmatic belief either invites or instigates the coercion of others.

Gibbon's Swiss interlude was formative in other ways. He met his life-long friends, Georges Deyverdun and John Baker Holroyd (later Lord Sheffield), and he fell in love with Suzanne Curchod, a woman who, some years after Gibbon's father had persuaded his son to relinquish the match ('I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son'), became a prominent *salonnière* and the wife of the French finance minister Jacques Necker.⁴ He became steeped in the French language, writing and even thinking in French, and this provided a gateway, among many other things, to the Huguenot tradition of 'free and critical enquiry into civil and Church history', as Richard Whatmore and Béla Kapossy point out in their chapter on 'Gibbon and Republicanism' (Chapter 7). Moreover, exposure to the spirit of liberty, martial independence and republicanism of the Swiss cantons undoubtedly honed Gibbon's early political thinking, and alerted him, as Whatmore and Kapossy point out, to the unusual phenomenon of republican empire in Bern. In the mid-1760s, he started to write but then later burned a history of the Swiss republics, and in his unpublished *Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne* (1763–4) he explored the material conditions created by modern forms of liberty. Whereas his ruminations on Swiss liberty were in implicit dialogue with the Swiss republics' greatest son, Rousseau, his physical presence in Lausanne brought him into direct contact with Geneva's most celebrated writer in exile, Voltaire. Gibbon attended some theatricals and dinners at Voltaire's Geneva residence, Les Délices, encountering the great man at the height of his powers as a historian. Voltaire had published a history of the age of Louis XIV (*Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, 1751) and was in the process of revising and extending the work now known as the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, a history of the politics, culture and international relations of the world from the time of Charlemagne to that of Louis XIV, first published in 1756. Gibbon was often dismissive of Voltaire's historical work, but there

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can be little doubt that he was spurred to surpass Voltaire's ambitious conception of history as global narrative, encompassing economic, cultural and technological developments, juxtaposing western and non-western histories of empire, and excoriating religious fanaticism as the barrier to civilisation. Gibbon's first published work, the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, largely written during this period, grapples with the problem of critical and philosophical perspective in historical and literary writing, engaging with Voltaire, and with the sociology of culture in the works of Montesquieu.⁵ In the *Essai*, Gibbon critically explored the ways in which Voltaire, Montesquieu and their contemporaries applied an 'esprit philosophique' to history, and considered how their methods of critical distillation both clarify and traduce the great traditions of European, polymathic erudition. Gibbon was fascinated by the theoretical insights of modern philosophers of history and society, and by Montesquieu in particular, but did not concede that this method superseded the empirical model of history as a cumulative, inherited body of documents, chronicles, data and inscriptions.

Lausanne remained close to Gibbon's heart. He visited again in 1763–4, and ultimately returned to live there permanently in 1783 with his friend Deyverdun. As David Womersley explains in the Afterword to this Companion, some of the papers left behind in Deyverdun's house have only recently been made available through the Lausanne city archives, and are beginning to shed more light on Gibbon's Swiss years. For now, Gibbon returned to England where his father granted him a modest annuity that enabled him to spend some time in London lodgings, and the rest reading deeply in the family library at Buriton in Hampshire, or carrying out military service in the local militia during the Seven Years' War. The Buriton library was the first of several personal libraries and collections out of which Gibbon eventually built the compendious scholarly edifice of footnotes to his history. His London library would finally contain up to six thousand volumes. Robert Mankin's chapter traces Gibbon's handling of the polyglot bibliographic resources of his libraries, and explores what this reveals about his scholarly method (Chapter 10). One major classification within his library, as Robert Mayhew points out in his chapter, was historical geography, reflecting his early and prodigious engagement with geographical erudition from maps to surveys, human geography and travel writing (Chapter 2). Gibbon was, from the outset, extraordinarily reliant on his own memory; he rarely made notes in his own books, added footnotes only after writing his text, and ultimately abandoned a long-held plan to produce a supplementary bibliographical volume to his history, stating that *The Decline and Fall*, in itself, provided a sufficient critical overview of the authors he had used.

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The end of the war furnished Gibbon with a precious opportunity to return to the continent, to carry out a tour of Italy, including Rome, Naples and Venice, and to learn Italian. Gibbon kept a journal of the 1764 portion of this trip from Geneva to Rome, but it was only much later in his autobiography (the six incomplete manuscript drafts that he composed between 1788 and 1793 towards the very end of his life) that he set down the now famous account of the first inspiration for his life's work, recapitulating his description of Christianity, in chapter 15 of *The Decline and Fall*, as a movement that 'finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the Capitol' (I, 446):⁶

It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted fryars 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.⁷

Catharine Edwards, in her chapter on Gibbon and the City of Rome, points out that, at the time, the Capitol was far from ruined, and the temple had long since been supplanted by Michelangelo's piazza (Chapter 3). Yet Gibbon's juxtaposition of the ascetic, historically oblivious Catholic ritual with the ruined majesty of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus succinctly evokes a long-range historical transformation in which the city of Rome figures as both epicentre and metonym for empire. Although Gibbon's history ranges across all those parts of the world remotely connected with the Roman and Byzantine empires, it is to the city and to the Capitoline hill that Gibbon finally returns in the closing chapters of his history as he roves imaginatively through its material ruins, before alluding to the shallow homage paid by the grand tourists who now come to Rome 'from the remote, and once savage, countries of the North' (III, 1084).

The Beginnings of *The Decline and Fall*

The germ of the idea of *The Decline and Fall* had been sown. Gibbon returned home to spend the next seven years 'seriously employed in preparing the materials of my Roman history', as well as engaging other experimental projects.⁸ In addition to the work on Swiss republics, he and his friend Deyverdun attempted a literary periodical, and he wrote a commentary on the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The death of his father, little lamented by Gibbon, at last liberated him to set up his own house and to pursue a fashionable literary existence in London featuring membership of Samuel Johnson's Club. In 1774, he obtained the safe and independent parliamentary seat of Liskeard in Cornwall, and found himself in the

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House of Commons, tongue-tied, as he admitted, but witness to the British government's handling of its first major imperial crisis in the North American colonies. Gibbon described these parliamentary sessions as 'a school of civil prudence', invaluable to the historian whose voting record demonstrated a degree of independence, but who supported the government more decisively and in print once the French entered the war and hopes for conciliation with the colonies were at an end.⁹ He profited, financially and in terms of lessons in civil prudence and imperial economics, from a stint on the Board of Trade and Plantations (1779–82), yet remained a European cosmopolitan in political outlook and a self-described 'Citizen of the World'.¹⁰

Work on the history progressed apace. Gibbon's conception of the project had a degree of fluidity at the early stages. In his *Memoirs* he noted that his original plan was 'circumscribed to the decay of the City rather than of the Empire', but it is nevertheless clear that he had a very long-standing interest in the chronological period covered by the final work, as well as in ancient chronology more generally.¹¹ There are some surviving marginal notes to a copy of the *History* in Gibbon's hand, probably dating from the 1790s, where he appears to reproach himself for not having 'deduced the decline of the Empire from the civil Wars that ensued after the fall of Nero', or even earlier, but he was surely aware of the dangers of endless regress (III, 1093). In the Preface to the first volume he enters into an 'engagement' with his readers to cover the 'complete history of the Decline and Fall of Rome, from the age of the Antonines, to the subversion of the Western Empire' and encompassing the Crusades, the rise of Islam, and the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 (I, 2–3). The first volume, published in 1776, begins with an overview of the Roman Empire at the height of its extent and prosperity during the reigns of the emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, and the narrative proper gets going in AD 180 with the accession of Commodus and long ensuing slide into military despotism. The volume ends during the reign of Constantine, the first emperor formally to adopt the Christian faith, and with the famous overview, in chapters 15 and 16, of the rise and survival of Christianity during the preceding era of persecution. When he published the next two volumes, in 1781, Gibbon renewed his pledge, in the preface, to stay the course until 1453, and this time covered the period from the relocation of the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople through Alaric's sack of Rome in AD 410, to the removal of the western Roman emperor, around AD 476, by a barbarian ruler. The volumes conclude with Gibbon's 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West', one of the few places in the history where he draws comparisons between Roman and modern times. He offers his readers a heavily qualified assurance that the barbarian obliteration of

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western Roman civilisation is unlikely to be repeated in more populous, developed modern Europe, and he even makes the highly topical prediction that even if a barbarian invasion should occur, 'Europe would revive and flourish in the American world' whatever 'may be the changes of their political situation' (II, 513–14 and note 8).

For John Pocock, the author of *Barbarism and Religion*, the definitive, six-volume study of Gibbon and his intellectual context, this marks the end of the first of the 'two trilogies' of *The Decline and Fall*. The second trilogy, comprising the final three volumes published together in 1788, no longer centred upon the western provinces of the Roman Empire, but on the east. The second trilogy covers a thousand years, from the mid-fifth century onwards, and an immense geographical terrain, encompassing the institutional and theological developments within the Christian churches, and covering all the empires and peoples – Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Franks, Alamanni, Lombards, Slavs, Vandals, Mongols, Normans, Persians, Arabs, Ottomans, to name only a few – who themselves intersected with the history of the later Roman Empire. Although the narrative proper ends with the supine 'grief and terror' of the Latins at the news of the fall of Constantinople, Gibbon at several points ventures beyond his chronological remit and looks forward to the progress in Europe precipitated by the revival of classical heritage and the Reformation (III, 974).¹²

Christianity, Irony and Style

The Decline and Fall was published by the London firm of Strahan and Cadell. The first volume appeared as an expensive quarto volume priced at 1 guinea, sold out its first print run of 1,000 within days, and was reprinted twice more in the next two years.

Gibbon was gratified by this immense success, and, as he wrote, 'overpaid' by the admiration of his acquaintance David Hume. Hume, who had endured the travails occasioned by his 'Natural History of Religion' (1757), also warned in his letter of congratulation of the 'clamour' that Gibbon might expect from the pious.¹³ The first volume's closing account of the 'secondary' (as opposed to divine) causes of 'the progress of the Christian Religion' is, as Gibbon's believing contemporaries soon spotted, an exercise in subversive, polemical irony. Gibbon insinuates a causal connection between the ascent of Christianity – from underground plebeian cult to state religion – and the loss of the elite, civic culture that had previously sustained Rome's balanced constitution, political stability and military strength. Whereas paganism had been woven into the fabric of Roman civic life – tolerated with a secret 'smile of pity and indulgence' by Rome's philosophically minded ruling

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caste, yet practised with sufficient 'external reverence' so as not to insult the 'folly of the multitude' – Christianity discouraged active service for the state and army, and directed the early Christians' irrepressible 'love of action' towards a separate, and separatist, ecclesiastical realm of their own (I, 482). This ultimately depleted Roman public life and, in the very long run, reinforced passive acquiescence to superstition and tyranny (I, 58–9). Christians, meanwhile, were preoccupied with the prospect of happiness in the afterlife ('it is no wonder that so advantageous an offer should have been accepted by great numbers', I, 466), obsessed with self-denial and chastity ('the loss of sensual pleasure was supplied and compensated by spiritual pride', I, 481), and determined to reach out to as wide a social group as possible (far short, Gibbon writes with palpable sarcasm, of the 'odious imputation ... that the new sect of Christians was almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace', I, 508).

Many early readers would have recognised in Gibbon's pagan elites an illicit portrait of the British Anglican establishment, and might have savoured the irony of his debt to canonical ecclesiastical historians such as the Protestant writers Le Clerc and Mosheim, or the magisterial Jansenist historian of the early church, Tillemont.¹⁴ The impact of the two chapters may have been somewhat greater than Gibbon expected. He may, as John Pocock speculates, have made a last-minute decision to add the two chapters on the Christian church before Constantine to the end of his first volume, rather than placing them at the beginning of his second, and this may have given them more interpretive weight than he intended.¹⁵ There ensued over the next few years a number of published attacks, from across the religious spectrum, on Gibbon's infidelity as well as his scholarly accuracy. Claiming or perhaps feigning surprise, he held back until a particularly personal assault by the Oxford academic Henry Davis gave him a suitable opportunity to act 'in defence of my own honour' (III, 1111). In his *Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1779) he exonerated his scholarship and despatched his critics with coruscating vigour. Gibbon also anticipated or responded to these attacks in a series of revisions to the first volume. David Womersley documents these in his edition, and discusses them in his study *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'* in terms of the way in which the controversy may have sharpened his interpretation, in subsequent volumes, of the interplay of Christianity and empire.¹⁶

Like Gibbon himself, recent scholars have been at pains to demonstrate that the savage or sneering ironies of chapters 15 and 16 were of a different temper to the mockery of overtly anti-clerical reformers such as Voltaire or Joseph Priestley. Among the papers left behind in Deyverdun's house, there

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has recently emerged a short essay, composed in French around 1757, in which we can see the genesis of Gibbon's use of irony for the purposes of scholarly polemic. Presented by David Womersley in the Afterword to this Companion, Gibbon's animadversion against an obscure Swiss writer on the errors of contemporary freethinkers suggests that, from the outset, the spirit of his own freethinking was one of scholarly and intellectual, rather than political, subversion. As Brian Young comments, Gibbon wrote with arduous scholarly attention to ecclesiastical and theological matters with the principled detachment of one who felt it was not possible 'to be a disinterested scholar *and* a Christian' (Chapter 8). In his chapter Fred Parker gives an overview of the 'pervasively ironic' style of the *History* (Chapter 9), from the delicately placed adjective, antithesis or italic to flagrantly sarcastic rhetoric: 'But how shall we excuse the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophical world, to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses?' (I, 512). A starting point for the consideration of Gibbon's style has long been F. R. Leavis's account of his irony as a subliminal agent of Enlightenment:

The decorously insistent pattern of Gibbonian prose insinuates a solidarity with the reader ... establishes an understanding and habituates to certain assumptions. The reader, it is implied, is an 18th century gentleman ('rational,' 'candid,' 'polite,' 'elegant,' 'humane'); eighteen hundred years ago he would have been a pagan gentleman, living by these same standards (those of absolute civilization); by these standards (present everywhere in the stylized prose and adroitly emphasized at key-points in such phrases as 'the polite Augustus,' 'the elegant mythology of the Greeks') the Jews and early Christians are seen to have been ignorant fanatics, uncouth and probably dirty.¹⁷

However, as Parker shows, even Leavis's refined ear has misheard Gibbon's prose as always 'decorously insistent'. Gibbon's cadences are frequently deliberately imperfect, his sentences are balanced and symmetrical despite their syntactical proliferation, giving the impression of contained, restless energy. Gibbon's ironies, moreover, are often those, not of discourse, but of history itself which the narrator cannot fully synthesise. Parker's chapter also offers an important supplement to intellectual-historical approaches to *The Decline and Fall*, reminding us that 'Gibbon's thinking is realised only through and in the way he writes' (Chapter 9). Gibbon's extraordinary gifts as a stylist and the overtly constructed quality of his prose are bound up with his organisational mastery of his material. He frequently conceived of this in terms of monumental architecture, connected to his deep familiarity with the ancient and modern geographies of the two cities, Rome and Constantinople, at the heart of his narrative. Robert Mayhew draws

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attention to the spatially situated, commanding range of Gibbon's narrative perspective (Chapter 2), including his set-piece survey of Constantinople at the beginning of the second volume, and the opening 'circuit' of the whole empire at the end of the second century AD: clockwise from the Pillars of Hercules all the way back round to the Straits of Gibraltar (1, 54). Mayhew gives a sense of Gibbon's cinematic, brooding overview of his vast geographical canvas, the central metropolises brightly lit, the outer edges in a dark chiaroscuro of barbarian forests and steppes. Coleridge disliked Gibbon's scene painting: 'When I read a chapter in Gibbon I seem to be looking through a luminous haze or fog, figures come and go, I know not how or why, all larger than life, or distorted or discoloured; nothing is real, vivid, true; all is scenical and by candle light as it were.'¹⁸ Others have been more inclined to admire his spatial control and rendering of complex historical material, relishing connections between Gibbon's long lens and the sharp focus of his animated portraits of expansive, indeed expansionist, conquerors such as Timur, Chingiz Khan, Charlemagne and Belisarius.¹⁹

The larger organisational pattern of *The Decline and Fall* is built up from lengthy individual chapters, navigable by way of subheadings and enlivened by footnotes replete with erudite humour. Gibbon is master of the chapter form, a mode of narrative organisation that was at the time undergoing reinvention by contemporary novelists as a unit combining information, narrative dispensation and suspense. An exemplary case is the third chapter of the *History* in which Gibbon narrates the slow, invisible disappearance of Rome's free and balanced constitution, moves swiftly through the reigns of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian and the Antonines, 'the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was happy and prosperous' but when the 'fatal moment was perhaps approaching when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power, which they had exerted for the benefit of their people' (1, 103). Resonant with ominous drama, the chapter ends with a magnificent circumspection of an empire that 'filled the world', like a giant prison, from the 'barren rock of Seriphus' to the 'frozen banks of the Danube' from which there is no longer any escape. Gibbon closes with a quotation: "Wherever you are," wrote Cicero to the exiled Marcellus, "remember that you are equally within the power of the conqueror" (1, 107). With that lingering note of exile, foreboding and the implicit reminder of Cicero's assassination, the next chapter then initiates the narrative proper with Commodus, a licentious youth and jealous tyrant. So begins the course of overt political decline, little hindered by the attempt to reverse that decline by Commodus's more worthy successor Pertinax, whose assassination Gibbon places carefully at the end of another chapter.

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Classical, Enlightenment and Civil Narratives

The suspense, drama and slow trajectory of decline could not be narratively maintained through subsequent chapters. Commentators have long debated whether Gibbon fully envisaged that an account of the Roman Empire that covers over thirteen hundred years of history would really take the shape of 'decline and fall', as opposed to that of repeated calamities, protracted survival, adaption and transformation.²⁰ It is an issue of historiographical method and structure that Gibbon himself raised in the 'General Observations': 'instead of enquiring *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long' (II, 509). The celebrated flourish of Gibbon's title coexists with his commitment to primary-source-based exegesis, and with an increasing wariness of linear narrative. Gibbon's method, as Arnaldo Momigliano recognised in a landmark essay, was firmly rooted in the erudite and antiquarian traditions of philology, source criticism, legal history and material cultural analysis of the seventeenth century, and in this scholarly project to recover and respect distinctive pasts.²¹ At the same time, Gibbon retained his philosophic commitment, derived from contemporary historians such as Montesquieu, Giannone, Voltaire, Hume and William Robertson and first set out in his *Essai*, to critical distance, interpretive grand narrative and the mutual illumination of the study of the human mind and the study of causality. John Pocock's *Barbarism and Religion*, on which he reflects in his illuminating essay for this Companion (Chapter 1), traces the interplay in *The Decline and Fall* between these historiographical modalities, finding 'a mosaic of narratives', civil and ecclesiastical.²² The initial modality of Gibbon's history is the classical narrative of 'imperial overstretch' originated by Tacitus and other Roman historians themselves, and influentially restated in the eighteenth century by Montesquieu in his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734); according to this, Rome's military success in establishing an empire of vast territorial extent ultimately led to the decay of patriotic spirit as citizens relinquished their political rights to despots and their military role to professional armies, with the consequent overrunning of the empire by barbarians.²³ Gibbon explores and extends this master narrative throughout much of the first volume, later revealing only in chapters 15 and 16 the shaping presence of another narrative, the history of religion. This is partly a subset of the classical narrative (Christianity diverted the Romans from patriotism and military spirit), but it also emerges here and throughout the rest of *The Decline and Fall* as major explanatory nexus, eventually encompassing Islam as well as Arianism and other forms of Christianity.