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978-1-108-07216-8 - Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esquire: With Memoirs of his Life and Writings,

Composed by Himself: Volume 1

Edited by John Baker Holroyd

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Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esquire

On the death of Edward Gibbon (1737–94), his unpublished papers were left to his friend John Baker Holroyd, first earl of Sheffield, who published them in two volumes in 1796. Gibbon had written six manuscript accounts of his own life, and, according to Sheffield, had always intended to publish his autobiography in his lifetime. The memoir as edited by Sheffield begins with Gibbon's family history, and taking in his education, travels, and career as a historian, finishes with his anxiety over the future of Europe in 1788. Sheffield then continues the story until Gibbon's death through his correspondence, providing a linking narrative, and this, together with 210 other letters to and from Gibbon, takes up Volume 1. His great work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, is also reissued (in the 1896–1900 edition by J.B. Bury) in the Cambridge Library Collection.

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VOLUME 1

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W O R K S
OF
EDWARD GIBBON, Esquire.
WITH
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE AND WRITINGS,
COMPOSED BY HIMSELF:
ILLUSTRATED FROM HIS LETTERS,
WITH OCCASIONAL NOTES AND NARRATIVE,
By JOHN LORD SHEFFIELD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

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THE melancholy duty of examining the Papers of my deceased Friend devolved upon me at a time when I was depressed by severe afflictions.

In that state of mind, I hesitated to undertake the task of selecting and preparing his Manuscripts for the press. The warmth of my early and long attachment to Mr. Gibbon made me conscious of a partiality, which it was not proper to indulge, especially in revising many of his juvenile and unfinished compositions. I had to guard, not only against a sentiment like my own, which I found extensively diffused, but also against the eagerness occasioned by a very general curiosity to see in print every literary relick, however imperfect, of so distinguished a writer.

Being aware how disgracefully Authors of Eminence have been often treated, by an indiscreet posthumous publication of fragments and careless effusions; when I had selected those Papers which to myself appeared the fittest for the public eye, I consulted some of our common

A 2

friends,

friends, whom I knew to be equally anxious with myself for Mr. Gibbon's fame, and fully competent, from their judgment, to protect it.

Under such a sanction it is, that, no longer suspecting myself to view through too favourable a medium the compositions of my Friend, I now venture to publish them: and it may here be proper to give some information to the Reader, respecting the Contents of these Volumes.

The most important part consists of Memoirs of Mr. Gibbon's, Life and Writings, a work which he seems to have projected with peculiar solicitude and attention, and of which he left Six different sketches, all in his own hand-writing. One of these sketches, the most diffuse and circumstantial, so far as it proceeds, ends at the time when he quitted Oxford. Another at the year 1764, when he travelled to Italy. A third, at his father's death, in 1770. A fourth, which he continued to a short time after his return to Lausanne in 1788, appears in the form of Annals, much less detailed than the others. The two remaining sketches are still more imperfect. It is difficult to discover the order in which these several Pieces were written, but there is reason to believe that the most copious was the last. From all these the following Memoirs have been carefully selected, and put together.

My

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My hesitation in giving these Memoirs to the world arose, principally, from the circumstance of Mr. Gibbon's appearing, in some respect, not to have been satisfied with them, as he had so frequently varied their form: yet, notwithstanding this diffidence, the compositions, though unfinished, are so excellent, that they may justly entitle my Friend to appear as his own biographer, rather than to have that task undertaken by any other person less qualified for it.

This opinion has rendered me anxious to publish the present Memoirs, without any unnecessary delay; for I am persuaded, that the Author of them cannot be made to appear in a truer light than he does in the following pages. In them, and in his different Letters, which I have added, will be found a complete picture of his talents, his disposition, his studies, and his attainments.

Those flight variations of character, which naturally arose in the progress of his Life, will be unfolded in a series of Letters, selected from a Correspondence between him and myself, which continued full thirty years, and ended with his death.

It is to be lamented, that all the sketches of the Memoirs, except that composed in the form of Annals, and which seems rather designed as heads for a future Work,

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case about twenty years before Mr. Gibbon's death; and consequently, that we have the least detailed account of the most interesting part of his Life. His Correspondence during that period will, in great measure, supply the deficiency. It will be separated from the Memoirs and placed in an Appendix, that those who are not disposed to be pleased with the repetitions, familiarities, and trivial circumstances of epistolary writing, may not be embarrassed by it. By many, the Letters will be found a very interesting part of the present Publication. They will prove, how pleasant, friendly, and amiable Mr. Gibbon was in private life; and if, in publishing Letters so flattering to myself, I incur the imputation of vanity, I shall meet the charge with a frank confession, that I am indeed highly vain of having enjoyed, for so many years, the esteem, the confidence, and the affection of a man, whose social qualities endeared him to the most accomplished society, and whose talents, great as they were, must be acknowledged to have been fully equalled by the sincerity of his friendship.

Whatever censure may be pointed against the Editor, the Public will set a due value on the Letters for their intrinsic merit. I must, indeed, be blinded, either by vanity or affection, if they do not display the heart and mind of their Author, in

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such a manner as justly to increase the number of his admirers.

I have not been solicitous to garble or expunge passages which, to some, may appear trifling. Such passages will often, in the opinion of the observing Reader, mark the character of the Writer, and the omission of them would materially take from the ease and familiarity of authentic letters.

Few men, I believe, have ever so fully unveiled their own character, by a minute narrative of their sentiments and pursuits, as Mr. Gibbon will here be found to have done; not with study and labour—not with an affected frankness—but with a genuine confession of his little foibles and peculiarities, and a good-humoured and natural display of his own conduct and opinions.

Mr. Gibbon began a Journal, a work distinct from the sketches already mentioned, in the early part of his Life, with the following declaration :

“ I propose from this day, August 24th 1761, to
“ keep an exact Journal of my actions and studies, both
“ to assist my memory, and to accustom me to set a due
“ value on my time. I shall begin by setting down
“ some few events of my past life, the dates of which
“ I can remember.”

This

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This industrious project he pursued occasionally in French, under various titles, and with the minuteness, fidelity, and liberality of a mind resolved to watch over and improve itself.

The Journal is continued under different titles, and is sometimes very concise, and sometimes singularly detailed. One part of it is entitled “My Journal,” another “Ephemerides, or Journal of my Actions, Studies, and Opinions.” The other parts are entitled, “Ephemerides, ou Journal de ma Vie, de mes Etudes, et de mes Sentimens.” In this Journal, among the most trivial circumstances, are mixed very interesting observations and dissertations on a Satire of Juvenal, a Passage of Homer, or of Longinus, or of any other author whose works he happened to read in the course of the day; and he often passes from a Remark on the most common event, to a critical Disquisition of considerable learning, or an Enquiry into some abstruse point of Philosophy.

It certainly was not his intention that this private and motley Diary should be presented to the Public, nor have I thought myself at liberty to present it, in the shape in which he left it. But by reducing it to an account of *his literary occupations*, it formed so singular and so interesting a portrait of an indefatigable Student, that I persuade myself it will be regarded as a
valuable

valuable acquisition by the Literary World, and as an accession of fame to the memory of my Friend. With the Extracts from Mr. Gibbon's Journal will be printed, his Differtations entitled "Extraits raisonnés de mes Lectures:" and "Recueil de mes Observations, et Pieces détachées sur différens Sujets." A few other passages from other parts of the Journals, introduced in Notes, will make a curious addition to the Memoirs.

His First Publication, "Essai sur l'Etude de la Litterature," with corrections and additions from an interleaved copy which my Friend gave to me several years ago, is reprinted as part of these volumes.

Three more of his smaller Publications are also reprinted. 1. His masterly Criticism on the Sixth Book of Virgil, in answer to Bishop Warburton. 2. His own Vindication of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of his History, in answer to Mr. Davis and others. And 3. His "Reponse a l'Exposé de la Cour de France,"—an occasional composition, which obtained the highest applause in Foreign Courts, and of which he spoke to me with some pleasure, observing that it had been translated even into the Turkish language*.

Of these various writings the Author has spoken himself, in describing his own Life. I have yet to notice

* At Petersburg and Vienna it was currently observed by the Corps Diplomatique, that the English Ministry had published a Memorial written not only with great ability, but also in French, so correct, that they must have employed a Frenchman.

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some articles not mentioned in his Memoirs, and which will be found in this Publication. 1. A juvenile sketch, entitled, “Outlines of the History of the World.” 2. A Dissertation, which he had shewn to a few friends, on that curious subject, “L’Homme au Masque de Fer.” 3. A more considerable work, “The Antiquities of the House of Brunswick;” an historical discourse, composed about the year 1790. In this Work he intended to appropriate separate books: 1. To the Italian descent; 2. To the Germanic reign: and, 3. To the British Succession of the House of Brunswick. The Manuscript closes in completing the Italian branch of his subject.

Among the most splendid passages of that unfinished work may be enumerated, the characters of Leibnitz and Muratori: A sketch of Albert-Azo the Second, a prince who retained his faculties and reputation beyond the age of one hundred years: An account of Padua and its university, and remarks on the epic glory of Ferrara.

The last Paper of these Volumes has the mournful attraction of being a sketch interrupted by death, and affords an honourable proof that my Friend’s ardour for the promotion of historical knowledge attended him to the last. It is entitled merely, “An Address;” and expresses a wish that our Latin memorials of the middle ages, the “*Scriptores Rerum Anglicarum*,” may be published in
England,

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England, in a manner worthy of the subject, and of the country. He mentions Mr. John Pinkerton as a person well qualified for the conduct of such a national undertaking.

In the collection of writings which I am now sending to the press, there is no article that will so much engage the public attention as the Memoirs. I will therefore close all I mean to say as their Editor, by assuring the Reader, that, although I have in some measure newly arranged those interesting Papers, by forming one regular narrative from the Six different sketches, I have nevertheless adhered with scrupulous fidelity to the very words of their Author; and I use the letter S. to mark such Notes of my own, as it seemed necessary to add.

It remains only to express a wish, that in discharging this latest office of affection, my regard to the memory of my Friend may appear, as I trust it will do, proportioned to the high satisfaction which I enjoyed for many years in possessing his entire confidence, and very partial attachment.

SHEFFIELD.

SHEFFIELD-PLACE,
6th Aug. 1795.

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