

The View from Lausanne

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The Chicago Literary Club

October 28, 1996

**Summary: The View from Lausanne
presented by R W Carton - October 28, 1996**

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is generally acknowledged to be a masterpiece as well as the wittiest of European historical works. It was written by Edward Gibbon (1737 - 1794). Gibbon was essentially self-educated, although he was at times guided in his study by tutors. Thus he was not a professional historian but rather a gifted amateur and an independent 18th Century British gentleman.

His History is characterized by its wide historical range and impressive literary style. He showed clearly the transition between ancient Graeco-Roman culture and the world of modern Europe. The book does reflect the time and place of its creation but is still highly recommended to the general reader.

The View from Lausanne

Edward Gibbon's monumental Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire has been in print for two hundred and twenty years. It still appears on the list of the Modern Library and in a variety of other formats. It is hard to think of another work of history which has had a similar run. The book is formidable, even daunting. My copy, published by John Murray of London in 1854, occupies eight volumes. Footnotes appear on almost every page. Many are in Latin and some in Greek or French. Mercifully we are spared notes in German or Arabic. Gibbon knew neither of those languages. And yet the work continues to fascinate. The question is, "Why?". Let's look for some of the answers.

For one thing, it is about the history of Europe, a part of the world which is obviously of interest to us in the United States. At the core of Western Europe lie Italy, Spain, France, England, Switzerland, and Austria, all occupying land where Rome once ruled. . The Romans had a hard time with the Germans, but managed to establish outposts along the Rhine. Trier, Worms, and Cologne were important Roman towns during the late Empire.

Eastern Europe also reflects the Roman heritage, by way of

Byzantium and the Eastern Roman Empire. Thus the Decline and Fall is about our childhood, the childhood of nations. As any Freudian can tell you, the experiences of childhood linger, even though they may have left consciousness and persist only in the subconscious. As one travels through the former Roman territories tracks of this people appear everywhere. Their monuments in Italy are obvious. In Lugo, in northern Spain, there are Roman fortified walls which look as though they had been built in the high Middle Ages. Mosaic floors from Roman villas are regularly found in England.. In Baden Baden, in southwestern Germany, Roman baths with elaborated devices for heating water, coexist with modern devices for the same purpose. From this perspective the evolution of Rome, as it melted into the new nations in the West and persisted up to the middle of the 15th Century in the East, underlies our story. It is also the theme of Gibbon's great book

To understand Gibbon's achievement one has to know something of the man himself and of the circumstances under which his history was written. . He was not a professional historian at all, but rather a gentleman of decided scholarly tastes. He also was a one book man. That one book is, of course, the Decline and Fall, which was the only thing of any consequence which he wrote, if you will except his Autobiography.

This latter is informal, personal, more like a letter to a friend than a book designed to sell. It tells his story.

Edward Gibbon was born April 27, 1737, at Putney, England, the eldest and only surviving child of Edward Gibbon, Sr. - a country squire - and his wife, Judith. The boy growing up apparently saw little of his mother and seems not to have been overly distressed when she died when he was ten. He explains this neglect in the Autobiography, writing: "My mother's attention was somewhat diverted by her frequent pregnancies, by an exclusive passion for her husband, and by the dissipation of the world, in which his taste and authority obliged her to mingle." Thus she was dismissed.

With the father it was a different matter. Edward took his father very seriously. After he was grown the feeling was reciprocated. Like most English boys of his class and time he was sent at the age of eight to a preparatory school (in his case Dr. Wooddesdon's school at Kingston).

Several years later he was removed because of illness, probably bronchial asthma. He then was sent to a public school, Westminster, where again he lasted two years before ill health and a failure to cope with the rough atmosphere of a British boys' school brought him home once more. In desperation his father then enrolled young Edward at the

age of fourteen as a gentleman commoner in Magdalen College, Oxford University.

During all this broken schooling and unsettled home life Gibbon had developed one characteristic: He had become a passionate reader. At Kingston, "at the expense of many tears and some blood", he learned Latin syntax and was able to read Horace and Virgil with pleasure. At home he had access to his grandfather's library, where he read widely in English poetry and romance, history and travel. As he later explained, "I arrived at Oxford with a stock of erudition that might have puzzled a doctor, and a degree of ignorance of which a schoolboy would have been ashamed."

His stay at Oxford was not a success. Gibbon quickly saw through the laziness and incompetence of his tutors. His comments on them are classic:

"The fellows or monks of my time were decent easy men, who supinely enjoyed the gifts of the founder: their days were filled by a series of uniform employments; the chapel and the hall, the coffee-house and the common room, till they retired, weary and well satisfied, to a long slumber. From the toil of reading, or thinking, or writing, they had absolved their conscience; and the first shoots of learning and ingenuity withered on the ground, without yielding any

fruits to the owners or the public."

Young Gibbon did enjoy his quarters, three elegant and well-furnished rooms in the new building of Magdalen College. He also appreciated the perquisites which went along with the velvet cap and silk gown of a gentleman commoner. But he didn't learn much. Instead he took to spending periods away from his college, in Buckinghamshire, London, and Bath. These irregularities might have been overlooked, but not his ultimate indiscretion. The aimlessness of his life lead him to look for direction in religion. He sought out a Catholic priest. After a period of instruction he was accepted as a communicant in the Roman Catholic Church, and promptly announced this development to his father. The result was predictable. The gates of Magdalen were shut to him, as they were to every Roman Catholic in that Age. The time had come for extreme measures. On the advice of a friend, Mr. Gibbon, Senior, sent the young man to Lausanne, Switzerland, to reside and study under the eye of a Calvinist clergyman, Monsieur Daniel Pavillard.

The move to Lausanne at the age of sixteen represented for Gibbon the crisis of adolescence through which he was transformed from a frightened little boy into the self-possessed gentleman and scholar who became one of the ornaments of British culture. At first his movements

were severely restricted. With Pavillard he studied Latin, French, Greek, geography and history. After long discussions with his mentor he was readmitted to a Protestant congregation. With time he developed a true lust for scholarship. A Note from his Journal states that he read during the year 1756 the Latin works of Virgil, Sallust, Livy, Velleius Paterculus, Valerius Maximus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Quintus Curtius, Justin, Florus, Plautus, Terence, and Lucretius. He also read and meditated (sic) Locke upon the Understanding. As his ability in the French language improved he was encouraged to participate in the provincial society of Lausanne. He made friends. He was growing up.

By 1757 Gibbon was ready to return home to England. He had not seen his father for five years, but all reports of his son which the older man received were good, and his permission for the trip was given. France and England were at war, but Gibbon was able to travel through France disguised as an officer in the Dutch army. Apparently there was little risk, since the French were unlikely to believe that any Englishman could speak their language in a manner which combined correct grammar with a flawless accent.

The meeting in England with his parent was tender and loving on both sides. But his father's mood changed when he learned that his son wished

to marry an attractive young Swiss girl, Suzanne Curchod. In the face of his father's displeasure Gibbon backed down. In his own words, "I sighed like a lover. I obeyed like a son." The girl seems not to have been too disappointed. She subsequently married a rich Swiss banker, Jacques Necker, who became a historic figure as finance minister in the government of Louis XVI of France in the opening years of the French Revolution.

What was Edward to do now? He was well educated, the heir of a respectable country gentleman. For a person of his time and place a job in business was out of the question. After his brush with Catholicism and his subsequent readmission into the Protestant community he had relaxed into a posture of religious skepticism. Thus he was unsuited for a position in the Church. Fortunately the French settled the matter for him. In 1759 they threatened to invade England. The British responded by organizing the Hampshire militia. Neither Gibbon nor his father had any military experience, but this was England and they were country gentlemen. Mr. Gibbon Sr. was appointed a major and second in command of the new regiment. Edward became a captain in the same outfit. Two good things came out of this appointment. Over the next several years in the company of other young men in a military setting Gibbon became an

Englishman again. The knowledge of military affairs which he acquired in the militia was helpful to him later as he came to write of the battles of the Romans. Ultimately the routines, which consisted of soldiering by day and drinking by night, became distasteful to him, and he finally resigned from the militia in 1770, by which time he had become lieutenant colonel and commander of the regiment.

We remember that Gibbon was a militiaman and not a soldier in the regular army. His duties were not onerous. After the end of the war with France in 1762 they amounted only to annual exercises, similar to those of the American National Guard. He was left with ample time for other pursuits.

In 1763 he was in Europe again, first in Paris, where he was well received in the salons due to introductions from friends of his family as well as to favorable notice given a long essay on the study of literature which he had written in French and had published on the Continent. One is amazed by the ease with which people travelled between European capitals in the middle years of the eighteenth century, during the sunlit period after the wars of religion of the seventeenth century and before the French Revolution and the rise of nationalism. We read of the same Free Masonry of elites in James Boswell's journals of travel on the Continent

at this same time.

For a young Englishman no grand tour was complete without a period in Italy. Gibbon set off in April 1764. After passing through the mountains and visiting Venice, Milan, and Florence he finally reached Rome in October. Here suddenly the objects of his study of classical civilization seem to have come into focus. He himself later described the moment at which inspiration came:

"It was on the fifteenth of October in the gloom of evening, as I sat musing on the Capitol, while the barefoot friars were chanting their litanies in the temple of Jupiter, that I conceived the first thought of my history. My original plan was confined to the decay of the City; my reading and reflection pointed to that aim; but several years elapsed, and several avocations intervened, before I grappled with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire."

In 1770 Mr. Gibbon, Senior, died. Edward seems to have sincerely regretted his father's passing. Unquestionably he rejoiced in the independence which his inheritance brought him. He moved to London and settled himself at No. 7 Bentinck Street. Through the agency of a relative, Lord Elliot, he was elected to Parliament from the borough of Liskeard. . In March 1774 he was proposed for the Literary Club, of which leading

members were Sir Joshua Reynolds, Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Oliver Goldsmith, Sir Joseph Banks, Adam Smith, and David Garrick.. Apparently Gibbon had been blackballed when his name was first brought up, but by 1775 he was established as a member.

During all this period Gibbon was at work on his history of the Roman Empire. His situation in London was ideal. It offered access to libraries, independence, and the social life which he found necessary. Initially in writing his book he had some problems hitting a "middle tone between a dull chronicle and a rhetorical narrative". The first chapter was composed three times, and the second and third required two versions each. Then he settled down and advanced, as he said, "with a more equal and easy pace." In February 1776 The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, by Edward Gibbon Esquire, Volume the First was offered for sale by Thomas Cadell, bookseller of London, for a guinea. This was the first of six thick quartos. The original printing sold out almost immediately. Second and third editions were printed to supply demand and sold out before the end of the year.

What did the purchasers find when they rushed home to read what Mr. Gibbon had written? In the first place the language is gorgeous. It was then, and it is now. Here is an example of the Gibbon style, taken from

the first chapter of the first volume. He is explaining why the Roman general Agricola didn't bother to conquer the region now called Scotland, once the southern part of the island, known to the Romans as Britannia, had been subdued. He wrote:

"But the superior merit of Agricola soon occasioned his removal from the government of Britain; and for ever disappointed this rational, though extensive, scheme of conquest. Before his departure the prudent general has provided for security as well as for dominion. He had observed that the island is almost divided into two unequal parts by the opposite gulfs, or, as they are now called, the Firths of Scotland. Across the narrow interval of about forty miles he had drawn a line of military stations, which was afterwards fortified, in the reign of Antoninus Pius, by a turf rampart, erected on foundations of stone. This wall of Antoninus, at a small distance beyond the modern cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, was fixed as the limit of the Roman province. The native Caledonians preserved, in the northern extremity of the island, their wild independence, for which they were not less indebted to their poverty than to their valor. Their incursions were frequently repelled and chastised, but their country was never subdued. The masters of the fairest and

most wealthy climates of the globe turned with contempt from gloomy hills assailed by the winter tempest, from lakes concealed in a blue mist, and from cold and lonely heaths, over which the deer of the forest were chased by a troop of naked barbarians."

The adjectives are appropriate: "superior merit", "prudent general", "wild independence". Characteristic is Gibbon's ability to puncture balloons of pretense with irony, which is generally couched in a tone of amusement rather than of hostility: "no less indebted to their poverty than to their valor". He regularly opposes appearance and reality. A healthy nose for the latter adds much to the quality of the book.

The rhythm of the Ciceronian periods persists from beginning to end. The Gibbon style may be familiar to those of you who are veterans of the World War II period. Winston Churchill as a young man was stationed in India. With time on his hands he read the Decline and Fall, was impressed, and based his prose style on the models in that book. Churchill's great speeches of 1940 and 1941 derive much of their power from the example of Edward Gibbon's long cadenced sentences.

One must note the author's self-assurance. It shows up in that passage about Scotland which I just read you. It is the self-assurance of the age. It is the quality of feeling on top of things. This could end up as

arrogance. In Gibbon's case this confidence lead only to tolerance and humanity. At the time Gibbon wrote, England was the most modern and successful country in the world. The French had been defeated in the Seven Years War. British government had been pretty well stabilized after the revolutions of the seventeenth century. Newton and his colleagues of the Royal Society were the greatest scientists of the age. The Industrial Revolution was well along in its course. It was what Hegel was to call a period of synthesis, when momentarily the currents running through a culture seem to be in harmony. All of this is reflected in Gibbon's view that he is looking back from a period of tranquility in civilized England to the disorders attendant on the breakdown of the Graeco-Roman world and the formation of Modern Europe.

After the publication of the first volume of the Decline and Fall Gibbon emerged as a celebrity. He had always been fond of society, particularly of the company of beautiful and intelligent women. His new position in London was very much to his liking. However, the expenses of a life of sociability strained his resources. By this time he was a member of the London clubs, Brooks, Boodles, and Whites, and enjoyed the play which was expected of members of those organizations - without at any time experiencing uncomfortable losses at the gaming tables. . In

Parliament he consistently voted with the government of Lord North in its contest with those pesky colonists in North America. His financial shortfall was partly relieved by his having been appointed one of the Lords of Trade, officials who had minimal duties for which they received a stipend of 750 pounds a year. In February 1781 he was delivered of the second and third volumes of the History. These brought the story to the end of the Empire in the West and explained the beginnings of the civilization which we know as Byzantium.

By 1783 the American War had come to an end, and so had Gibbon's political career. The notion of living inexpensively in Europe appealed to him as did the promise of quiet in which to finish the history. By the end of that year he was installed in a comfortable house in Lausanne, where he was able work every morning and enjoy social life in the evenings. The circumstances for concentration on writing were ideal. Gradually the final three volumes, which carried the story from the fall of the West in 476 AD to the capture of Byzantium by the Turks in 1453 AD, were completed. Just as we know of the initial inspiration for the history, so we know - from a passage in the Autobiography - the circumstances surrounding its completion. He wrote:

"It was on the day, or rather the night, of the 27 of June 1787,

between the hours of eleven and twelve, that I wrote the last lines of the last page in a summer-house in my garden. After laying down my pen, I took several turns in a *berceau* or covered walk of Acacias, which commands a prospect of the country, the lake and the mountains. The air was temperate, the sky was serene, the silver orb of the moon was reflected from the waters, and all Nature was silent. I will not dissemble the first emotions of joy on the recovery of my freedom, and perhaps the establishment of my fame. But my pride was soon humbled, and a sober melancholy was spread over my mind by the idea that I had taken my everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion, and that, whatsoever might be the future date of my history, the life of the historian must be short and precarious."

The view from Lausanne was comprehensive. In The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Gibbon ranged over a period of twelve hundred years, a time which stretches from the high Roman Empire of Marcus Aurelius in the second century through to the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders in the thirteenth and its final fall to the Turks in the Fifteenth. Peoples appear and vanish. The Attila and his Huns come from central Asia and sweep into Gaul. The campfires of the Avars appear outside the

walls of Constantinople and then are gone. Roman emperors rise and fall. Some are larger than life: Constantine the Great, Justinian the Great, Theodosius, Diocletian. Some are monsters, such as Commodus and Elagabalus. The followers of Mohammed emerge from the Arabian desert and conquer lands as far from Mecca as Spain to the west and northern India to the east. Gradually, though all this turmoil the outlines of the modern world begin to emerge. The book is valuable for its sweep, if for nothing else.

But there is more. It's hard for us in America, living as we do two stages removed from the ancient world, to realize how much of that world has persisted, and for how long. For instance, Roman Emperors succeeded each other year after year in Constantinople, the Roman capital of the East, almost to the time of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. When Jack Broeksmit and I studied Medieval History together at high school sixty years ago, not much was said about Byzantium, but under Justinian and his successors in their capital of Constantinople elements of Graeco-Roman civilization flowered in the forms of painting, sculpture (particularly in ivory), law, and religious thought. The 53rd chapter of the Decline and Fall is a fine description of Byzantine achievement in the tenth century, at a time when learning and the arts

had been pretty well extinguished in the West.

At the time of its publication, the Decline and Fall was criticized for its treatment of the rise of Christianity. In chapters 15 and 16 Gibbon describes the growth and spread of Christian belief, the great persecutions, and the final triumph of Christianity under Constantine, from 310 AD on. Actually Gibbon's treatment of this subject would not be thought extraordinary today. He pioneered in the notion that religious history should be examined by the same critical methods used in the study of secular history. Gibbon himself, as we have noted above, was a religious skeptic - not hostile but not sympathetic. For a more understanding treatment of this same period I recommend Peter Brown's fine new book, The Rise of Western Christendom.

And of course Edward Gibbon was writing in the Eighteenth Century. He thought of history in terms of the activities of unusual men and women. He did not use statistics. He did not examine the lives of people out in the fields and in the mines who were doing the work which kept great people fed, clothed and sheltered. He did not search out the occurrence of epidemics, nor did he examine harvests. He looked for the strengths and weaknesses of notable characters, who lead their followers to victory or defeat. If this approach appeals to you. if you would like to see the

tapestry of history unroll yard after yard and year after year,
if you like to find all of this couched in great language, this is the book
for you. You will find that you have inherited from Edward Gibbon not
just a week or a month but years or perhaps even a lifetime of reading
pleasure.

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