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Edward Gibbon & the Enlightenment

by *Keith Windschuttle*

On The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon.

Few people today have read the whole of Edward Gibbon's masterpiece, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The full text, originally published between 1776 and 1788 in six volumes, and recently repackaged in three volumes for the Penguin Classics series,[1] comprises a daunting three-thousand-plus pages. However, many more have read excerpts or chapters selected to illustrate certain attributes of the author, especially his elegant literary style, his civilized values and the famous drollery of his wit. Gibbon is widely regarded as a typical man of the Enlightenment, dedicated to asserting the claims of reason over superstition, to understanding history as a rational process, and to replacing divine revelation with sociological explanations for the rise of religion. He is probably cited most often for his facetious observations about early Christianity. He is particularly severe on the miracles ascribed to the early monastics.

> The favourites of heaven were accustomed to cure inveterate diseases with a touch, a word, or a distant message; and to expel the most obstinate daemons from the souls, or bodies, which they possessed. They familiarly accosted, or imperiously commanded, the lions or serpents of the desert; infused vegetation into a sapless trunk; suspended iron on the surface of the water; passed the Nile on the back of a crocodile, and refreshed themselves in a fiery furnace. These extravagant tales, which display the fiction, without the genius, of poetry, have seriously affected the reason, and the morals, of the Christians. Their credulity debased and vitiated the faculties of the mind: they corrupted the evidence of history; and superstition gradually extinguished the hostile light of philosophy and science.

He tells the story of a Benedictine abbot who confessed: "'My vow of poverty has given me an hundred thousand crowns a year; my vow of obedience has raised me to the rank of a sovereign prince.'—I forget the consequences of his vow of chastity." He recounts how the practices of penance and the renunciation of the world produced one sect of Anchoret monks who "derived their name from their humble practice of grazing in the fields of Mesopotamia with the common herd." More grimly, he reports the murderous zeal with which Christians pursued those of the faith defined as heretics. He produces a document from an inquisition into the heresy of Eutyches in 448 A.D.: "'May those who divide Christ, be divided with the sword, may they be hewn in

pieces, may they be burnt alive!' were the charitable wishes of a Christian synod."

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In contrast to such passion, Gibbon prefers the philosophical temperament of ancient Athens, and he reserves his severest rebukes for two of the men who broke "the golden chain of Platonic succession." The Archbishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, "a bold, bad man, whose hands were alternately polluted with gold, and with blood," in 389 A.D. sacked the edifices of the old Roman pagan religion, destroying the library of Alexandria and the two hundred thousand volumes of Greek and Roman literature deposited there by Marc Antony. "The compositions of ancient genius, so many of which have irretrievably perished, might surely have been excepted from the wreck of idolatry, for the amusement and instruction of succeeding ages; and either the zeal or the avarice of the archbishop, might have been satiated with the rich spoils, which were the reward of his victory." The Emperor Justinian in 529 A.D. suppressed the remaining Greek schools of philosophy in the name of Christ. "The Gothic arms were less fatal to the schools of Athens than the establishment of a new religion, whose ministers superseded the exercise of reason, resolved every question by an article of faith, and condemned the infidel or sceptic to eternal flames." In the summary of the fall of Rome that he gives midway through his opus, Gibbon includes "the abuse of Christianity" as one of the causes.

> The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloyster: a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion; and the soldiers pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes, who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity… . the church, and even the state, were distracted by religious factions, whose conflicts were sometimes bloody, and always implacable; the attention of the emperors was diverted from the camps to the synods; the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny; and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of their country.

Gibbon's modern reputation, accordingly, is largely that of an English Voltaire or Montesquieu, a man warning his country, at a time of its own rising imperial fortunes, of the need to throw off the shackles of superstition and the institutions that produced it. There are aspects of Gibbon's own career that support this impression. After he left Oxford, his real education took place at Lausanne in French Switzerland, and his first attempts at literary essays were written in French. His own great work, though inspired by his celebrated vision of barefoot monks chanting vespers in the Temple of Jupiter in the Capitol, actually began as an English attempt to better Montesquieu's earlier history of Rome, *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur of Rome and its Decline*.

Certainly, it was as an Enlightenment radical that Gibbon appeared to my generation who, as undergraduates in the 1960s, read him in the only version of his work then readily and cheaply

available, the nine hundred page abridged edition published by Penguin under its old Pelican label. But now, reading the whole thing in this new Penguin Classics edition, a very different Gibbon emerges, one that suggests an alternative view of the Enlightenment in England as well.

Apart from publishing the full text, the major difference between the Penguin Classics and the old Pelican edition is that the former contains all Gibbon's footnotes, which are so extensive they consume roughly 20 percent of the total printed space. In a few places, they take up no less than three-quarters of the whole page. Gibbon uses his footnotes not only to source his references but also to make lengthy, sometimes acrimonious, sometimes witty, commentaries on the veracity of both his primary and secondary sources. (A sample: "The Dissertation of M. Biet seems to have been justly preferred to the discourse of his more celebrated competitor, the Abbé le Boeuf, an antiquarian, whose name was happily expressive of his talents.")

In their interpretations of the course of empire, the English and French Enlightenments are worlds apart.

Those with the fortitude to read them will find that a considerable number of Gibbon's notes are devoted to disputing the French version of events, especially those of Baron Montesquieu and several other Enlightenment philosophes. Gibbon corrects Montesquieu in both his detail and his theory of history. He points out that Montesquieu is ignorant of the extent of the penetration Gothic barbarians had made of both Rome's territory and its mercenary forces—"the principal and immediate cause of the fall of the Western Empire." And as the Introduction by Penguin's editor, David Womersley, argues, and the text itself confirms in many places, Gibbon has a completely different interpretation of the nature of history. Montesquieu was committed to establishing that the surface milieu of history bore an underlying rationale and that there were general causes for the rise and fall of civilizations that transcended the influence of individuals. *The Decline and Fall*, however, is a demonstration that history is often driven by politics and sometimes by chance and that human passion usually presides over human reason. In their interpretations of the course of empire, the English and French Enlightenments are worlds apart.

Gibbon is well known for the aphorism that "history is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind," but this expression is rarely taken seriously because his own work appears to contradict it. *The Decline and Fall* contains some of the earliest versions of what later became the specializations of social history (in his analysis of the character of the barbarians of Germany and Siberia), economic history (the trade between Rome and China), and religious history (the sociology of paganism and Christianity; the institutional

and theological development of the church). However, in the realm of Gibbon's political history, it remains true that "crimes, follies and misfortunes" dominate the scene for long periods of time.

One of the reasons that Gibbon remains such a good read today is the pace of his story as he narrates the careers of those who ascended to the emperor's purple robe from what were sometimes very humble origins as common soldiers, peasants, and slaves, or even, as in the case of Justinian's wife, the Empress Theodora, from the nude cabaret and brothels of Constantinople. But equality of opportunity was matched by equality of outcome. Rome was plagued for most of its existence by the problem of succession, which was normally accomplished by a civil or military rebellion combined with the assassination of the incumbent. "Such was the unhappy condition of the Roman emperors, that whatever might be their conduct, their fate was commonly the same. A life of pleasure or virtue, of severity or mildness, of indolence or glory, alike led to an untimely grave; and almost every reign is closed by the same disgusting repetition of treason and murder."

The subjects of these princes sometimes remained immune to the violence of succession but at other times were bound up with it. In just three battles in the civil war of 323 A.D. between Constantine and Licinius, sixty thousand Romans were left dead in the field. When emperors fell, Gibbon notes, they could take whole provinces with them. After the failed revolt in about 265 A.D. of Ingenuus, whose troops in the province of Illyricum (the Balkans) had elevated him to usurp the purple, his rival Gallienus sent a message to one of his ministers. "It is not enough," says that soft but inhuman prince,

> that you exterminate such as have appeared in arms: the chance of battle might have served me as effectually. The male sex of every age must be extirpated; provided that, in the execution of the children and the old men, you can contrive means to save our reputation. Let every one die who has dropt an expression, who has entertained a thought against me, against *me*, the son of Valerian, the father and brother of so many princes. Remember that Ingenuus was made emperor: tear, kill, hew in pieces. I write to you with my own hand, and would inspire you with my own feelings.

Gibbon's analysis is sophisticated enough to recognize that a large-scale political system such as the Roman Empire can itself display relative stability while at the same time suffering continuous turbulence at the level of the palace. In the history of great monarchies, he says, the attention of both the writer and reader of history is naturally drawn to the court, the capital, and the army, while the millions of obedient subjects pursue their lives in obscurity. In less established systems, such as the early republics of Athens or Sparta, the impact of ordinary individuals is much greater and thus attracts more historical attention, even when this is sometimes unwarranted.

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subject.

In other words, in opposition to the French search for general laws of historical causation, Gibbon argues that explanations need to be appropriate to their subject. In some historical circumstances, such as newly formed or emerging polities, the role of individuals such as founding fathers may be profound; in other circumstances, a system may be so well entrenched that it might survive the worst kind of abuse from apparently powerful political figures. Similarly, once major internal systemic problems have emerged, neither the fortunes nor adversities of politics may be able to stem the tide. Under Justinian, the general Belisarius recaptured Italy from the Goths and Africa from the Vandals. But the economic decline of Rome, coupled with high taxes and the complete loss of martial spirit among the citizens, meant that new armies could not be raised and so the territorial gains could not be held. Gibbon deploys a counterfactual (a device that some recent authors imagine has only just been invented) to argue that, under the reign of Justinian's Byzantine court, Rome had reached the state of economic and political weakness where, even if "all the Barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire of the West."

Gibbon also argues for the impact upon history of the role of chance, of the perfidy of distant decisions, and of the influence of unintended consequences. The outcomes of the wars between the various German tribes who contested the territories on the periphery of the empire, Gibbon demonstrates, depended as much on luck and ignorance of the enemy's position as it did on strength of arms and valor. The eventual survival of the Franks in Gaul was due to such accidents and fortune, while the complete extermination of the Gepidae nation was the result of an alliance formed between the Lombard and the Avar kings that was directed more at Rome than at the hapless victim.

Volume Three of the Penguin edition traces the empire from 640 to 1500 when its history is dominated by the emergence of Islam, first by the Arab conquest of the Middle East and Africa, second by the Crusades which were organized in response, and third by the final capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans. The growth of Islam, Gibbon contends, was a matter of chance. Deploying another counterfactual, he argues that had Justinian's Abyssinian allies not lost an obscure military conflict in Yemen in the sixth century, Arabia would have been preserved for Christianity and the Islamic uprising that began in Mecca would never have happened. "Mahomet must have been crushed in his cradle, and Abyssinia would have prevented a revolution which has changed the civil and religious state of the world."

Although Penguin's editor, David Womersley, says Gibbon's satires of religion derive from Voltaire, it may be argued that he is just as distant from this Frenchman as he is from Montesquieu. The complete edition provides the opportunity to examine his every word about Christianity, not just the salacious bits. I read the whole three volumes looking for an admission or even a hint somewhere that he was an atheist or at least a skeptic, as I had long

thought, but could find none. In fact, the work is an affirmation of the author's Christian faith. He talks unambiguously about Jesus as "the Son of God" and of "the pure and proper divinity of Christ." He says that the first cause for the success of the Christian religion was due to "the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself and to the ruling providence of its great Author," and that his own analysis of the sociology of the early believers should be seen as an account of "the secondary causes." Counterbalancing his denunciation of bishops like Theophilus of Alexandria is the fact that some of his most elegant prose and highest praise is reserved for other figures of the church, especially Pope Gregory the Great, who converted Brittania, and Boethius, the Roman Senator and Christian philosopher martyred by the Goths. He also expresses a debt of gratitude to those monastic monks who preserved the monuments of Greek and Roman literature through the Dark Ages of barbarian rule.

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All of Gibbon's mockery of the miracles claimed for hermit monks, of the celibacy of the clergy, of the worship of images and relics, and of the temporal lust for wealth and power displayed by so many princes of the church, can be explained by his Protestantism. Writing for an English audience, he is making the same kinds of criticism of Roman Catholicism that Protestants had urged since Luther. To a Protestant audience, all his ridicule is directed at safe targets—the indulgence, myths, and deviations of Popery—and does not call into question the basis of the religion itself. At one point, he even comments that an epistle he cites will be "painful to the Catholic divines; while it is dear and familiar to our Protestant polemics." Moreover, his identification of Christianity as one of the causes of the fall of Rome is far from unequivocal. He certainly ascribes some responsibility to the otherworldliness adopted by "the useless multitudes of both sexes" who locked themselves away from society, but in the same passage he goes on to record how Christianity was a "principle of union as well as of dissension" and that the sermons from the pulpits of the empire "inculcated the duty of passive obedience to a lawful and orthodox sovereign."

Gibbon's own justification for recording so many of the flaws of the faith is that he is not writing theology, which is "the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity," but history, which discovers "the inevitable mixture of error and corruption, which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings." The Christianity for which he acknowledges most sympathy is the simple faith of the gospels, the creed that prevailed before theologians and bishops emerged to generate heresies, inquisitions, schisms, and innumerable sentences of death over fine lines of doctrine which few of the priesthood, let alone their parishioners, fully understood. He quotes with approval the sentiments of Procopius, the chronicler of the political, military, and religious accomplishments of

the age of Justinian:

> *that* religious controversy is the offspring of arrogance and folly; *that* true piety is most laudably expressed by silence and submission; *that* man, ignorant of his own nature, should not presume to scrutinise the nature of God; and *that* it is sufficient for us to know, that power and benevolence are the perfect attributes of the Deity.

Though it initially attracted some critics, Gibbon's work was generally highly praised when it was published. It turned him into a London literary celebrity, and he was one of the most popular authors of his day. In 1776, he said his first volume was "on every table and on almost every toilet." This means his writing was both an expression and a reflection of enlightened opinion in late eighteenth-century England. If this is so, then this opinion cannot be equated with that of France at the same time. Besides those already discussed, there are other areas in *The Decline and Fall* that, if examined in detail, could make the same point. For instance, while the philosophes saw their king as the barrier to freedom, Gibbon argued that a hereditary monarchy was a precondition for a civilized political system since it solved the problem of arbitrary succession that had caused so much and such predictable bloodshed in Rome.

His attitude to the savages and barbarians of Siberia and Africa was also the opposite of his French contemporaries'. In a long passage, he dissects and demolishes Montesquieu's concept of the "noble savage," the idea that the natural man is virtuous and that it is civilization that makes him corrupt. For Gibbon, this Romantic idea is the opposite of the truth, as he demonstrates through several extensive examinations of the bleak and lawless pastoral societies of the Goths, Vandals, Huns, Tartars, Mongols, and other nomads of the plains of Siberia and the Ukraine who periodically fought their way across the Danube to wreak havoc on the cultivated lands of the Mediterranean.

In short, the intellectual product and legacy of the English Enlightenment is quite different from that of the French.

In short, the intellectual product and legacy of the English Enlightenment is quite different from that of the French. In Gibbon, the spirit of inquiry and the fruits of research confirm the value of the existing institutions of English society, including its religion. In France, these tools were deployed in opposition to the same institutions. In England, Gibbon emphasized the responsibility of individuals and celebrated the virtue and courage of statesmen and churchmen, where they existed, even though he recorded that the natural passions of humanity were likely to leave such qualities in short supply. In France, the philosophes sought to find general laws of society that would render the actions of individuals irrelevant. The intellectual heritage of the English Enlightenment, as exemplified in Gibbon, clearly goes some of the way to explaining the different political histories of the two countries in the ensuing two centuries. England has enjoyed a stable and peaceful national history marked by a gradual extension of its democracy; France has been periodically racked by revolution, internal collapse, and foreign invasion.

Let me finish with some overdue praise for those responsible for the three-volume Penguin Classics edition now available. The publishers have done a fine job with very readable, sturdy paperbacks that open nicely and do not fall apart. The price is a bargain. Despite the disagreement with David Womersley I have recorded above, it should be said that his Introduction is the best essay I have yet seen on *The Decline and Fall* and, indeed, the best Introduction to any of the Penguin Classics I have read. Each volume contains the text of the first edition but also includes a list of the corrections the author made in subsequent reprints. Typos are rare: I noted only six in total, all in Volume Two. Volume Three contains three invaluable appendices: Gibbon's Vindication, or reply to his critics, that was originally published separately; a bibliographical index that refers to every source cited in the footnotes; and a witty, general index of the original six volumes that was published in 1788 but never reprinted since. My only complaint is that there is no map of the ancient world.

Toward the end of his Introduction, David Womersley advises: "You are on the threshold of one of the greatest narratives of European literature." Who could disagree? In its own way, *The Decline and Fall* is as powerful a work of art as *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, or Handel's *Messiah*. Unlike these three, unfortunately, you cannot pop out one evening to the theater to take it in. It needs a whole summer holiday or a long winter by the fire, a time scale few of us today are likely to commit more than once or twice in a lifetime. Still, like any great work of art, once you have experienced it, you wonder how you could have lived without it.

Notes

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1. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Edward Gibbon. Edited and with an Introduction by David Womersley; Penguin Classics, 3,476 pages, $75 for the three-volume box set. Go back to the text.

Keith Windschuttle's latest book is *The White Australia Policy* (Macleay Press). His website is www.sydneyline.com.

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