

Edward Gibbon

By the numbers

Lived 1737-1794, mostly southern England and Lausanne

Decline and Fall published 1776-1788

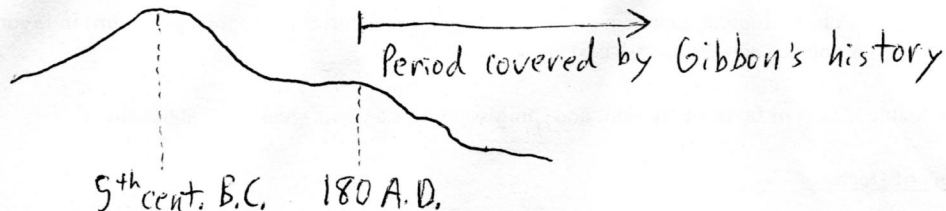
Fills 6 volumes, 3,616 pages (Womersley ed.)

Why Rome?

The Moment of Conception:

"It was at Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol while the barefooted friars were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started in my mind."

Toynbee pattern of 'Hellenic Civilization' (1933):



Enlightenment concerns: Rome over Greece, Cicero over Plato, Tacitus over Thucydides

- too much mysticism in Greek writings (*Republic, Timaeus*)

-Gibbon concedes Greece more artistically creative and intellectually original, but cult of creativity and originality doesn't begin until German Romantics (~1790's)

"it is scarcely possible for a mind endowed with any active curiosity to be long conversant with the Latin classics without aspiring to know the Greek originals, whom they celebrate as their masters"

-Rome more sturdy, rational, practical, politically successful

-Rome's laws its greatest achievement, important to Enlightenment project of statecraft

Why did Rome fall? (and could it happen again to modern Europe?)

Big Assumption – understanding of why Rome fell can be imported and applied to present civilization of Europe

Three views of history in circulation ca. 1760:

Providential – history is the work of God, inscrutable without reference to His will

- Bossuet's *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*, 1681

Skeptical – history is a collection of amusing facts from which no lesson can be learned

- Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, 1695

Philosophical – from history can be gained an understanding of the conditions that influence events

- Montesquieu's *de l'Esprit des Loix*, 1748

"my delight was in the frequent perusal of Montesquieu, whose energy of style, and boldness of hypothesis, were powerful to awaken and stimulate the genius of the age"

'Philosophical approach' first explored during Renaissance by Machiavelli and others, but climate of religious debate after Protestant Reformation hampered its development. Revived in 1723 by Pietro Giannone's *Civil History of Naples*, which Gibbon read as a young man.

Gibbon hoped to resolve an ongoing debate between *érudits* and *philosophes*. *Decline and Fall* represents a union of both approaches.

Gibbon's achievement (immediately recognized by contemporaries) could be said to be the integration of masses of historical detail with theories of explanatory power, in a rigorous (exhaustive primary sources) and dogmatically minimal way.

-none of the theories wins out over the detail, but all remain embedded in it

-abandons the strictly chronological approach of earlier large-scale histories (Baronius, Mosheim) in favor of a loosely-chronological theme- and problem-based approach

-greatest noticeable bias is in favor of 'reason' and 'philosophy' as against 'zeal' and 'superstition'

Explanations of Decline

"If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus." (96-180 A.D.)

Compare with Robertson (1769):

"If a man were called to fix upon the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most calamitous and afflicted, he would without hesitation name that which elapsed from the death of Theodosius the Great to the establishment of the Lombards in Italy." (*History of Charles V*)

The reasons, in chronological order....

1. Growth of luxury in late Republic leads to softening, corruption (Polybius, Machiavelli)
2. Loss of liberty to a monarch enervates society (Tacitus)
3. Decline of learning under Antonines
4. Corruption of military discipline in third century
5. Debasement of coinage to award donatives to military
6. Influence of 'oriental religion', first Syrian and later Christian
7. Collapse of agriculture, trade
8. Invasions of barbarians

First two based on tradition of 'Republican virtue' running through Polybius, Tacitus, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Hume, Jefferson, etc.

- Roman Republic possessed a 'golden moment' where the rise of modest wealth and intellectual cultivation coexisted with the original hardiness and freedom of the tribe
- citizens were "possessed of arms, tenacious of property," before rising luxury caused them to forego freedom for monarchical rule and mercenary army
- Antonine emperors allowed Rome to enjoy a silver age where the rule of a philosophical emperor (esp. Marcus Aurelius) kept people in a happy state

The first two reasons seem to lead to the later ones, although this is not *explicitly* laid out by Gibbon, who does not force the reader into any theory

Although he mentions problems of debased coinage and agricultural famine, they do not carry the weight that later historians would give them (Rostovtzeff, Moss)

Church History

"In the preceding chapters of this history, I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion...."

Biographical: Gibbon raised Church of England, converted to Roman Catholicism at 16, sent by father to live with a Protestant minister in Lausanne, reconverted to Protestantism two years later, soon abandoned Christianity in favor of skepticism and Deism

Famous cynicism and sarcasm:

"Under the reign of Tiberius, the whole earth, or at least a celebrated province of the Roman empire, was involved in a preternatural darkness of three hours. Even this miraculous event, which ought to have excited the wonder, the curiosity, the devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history. It happened during the lifetime of Seneca and the elder Pliny, who must have experienced the immediate effects, or received the earliest intelligence, of the prodigy. Each of these philosophers, in a laborious work, has recorded all the great phenomena of Nature, earthquakes, meteors, comets, and eclipses, which his indefatigable curiosity could collect. Both the one and the other have omitted to mention the greatest phenomenon to which the mortal eye has been witness since the creation of the globe."

Not completely hostile, however

- praises the "salutary" moral doctrines of the Gospels and their primitive followers
- sarcasm develops with theological debates of Church councils and ascetic practices
- condemns zeal and bigotry of all types, almost evenhandedly (no respect for Voltaire)

John Henry Newman honored him as the only Englishman who deserves to be called an ecclesiastical historian

Attitude to Islam actually more respectful than to Christianity, partially owing to influence of Boulainvilliers

Bias against theology and mysticism leads to almost complete derision towards Byzantine Empire; attacks of Arabs, Turks, Tartars seem welcome and refreshing

Final Conclusion?

Modern European civilization not doomed to fall. Advancement of science a permanent improvement; competitiveness of various nations forms a rough image of a republic as opposed to a monarchy.

Two quotes of further interest:

"Their [the "haughty ministers of the church"] speculative opinions were imposed as positive laws, and guarded by the terrors of eternal punishments; but while they prescribed the rigid formulary of the thoughts, the words, and the actions of the young prince; whilst they silenced his objections, and severely checked the freedom of his inquiries, they secretly provoked his impatient genius to disclaim the authority of his ecclesiastical guides." (describing the Emperor Julian's education, DF II.410)

"a man of genius, at once eloquent and philosophic, who should accomplish, in the maturity of age, the immortal work which he had conceived in the ardour of youth." (recommending another historian)