The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire

David Dillon-Smith
University of Wollongong

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THE HISTORIAN AS MORALIST: A STUDY OF EDWARD GIBBON
AND THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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DAVID DILLON-SMITH, M.A., Dip. Ed.

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VOLUME
ONE
This thesis is my own work.

David Dillon-Smith
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I owe sincere thanks to those who have typed and made countless corrections to my work: Mrs. Margaret Massey, Mrs. Myrtle Treloar, Miss Angela Chan and Mrs. Lynn Hutton, whose careful labours are greatly appreciated. As the burden of proof-reading fell on me, I have only myself to thank and blame and must therefore apologize for any errors which remain. I need not apologize, however, for adhering to Gibbon's sometimes odd spellings, especially in French and his rare sprinkling of accents, faithfully transcribed by his editors and rivalled by those of Suzanne Curchod. As he chose to stick with 'the famous though improper' spelling 'Mahomet', I have followed his usage in this and in names like 'Liutprand' which appears in my bibliography, however, as 'Liudprand'.
ABBREVIATIONS

The thesis contains very few abbreviations, at least in the form of initials, and those few are fairly generally accepted:

BM The British Museum, now The British Library

DF The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.


ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a significant aspect of Gibbon's thought and outlook and its effect on his major work. Part I traces the development of moral attitudes in the man and their expression in his early and exploratory writings. The first and second chapters trace this development through his reaction to Oxford, his apprenticeship in Lausanne and his return to England, as the moral foundations were laid and tested till the aspiring historian was ready to turn his mind to the choice of a satisfying subject. Chapter three pauses to survey the principles he explored and tentatively set down in his first publication and notes their significance for the emerging historian. Chapter four considers his quest for a worthy subject and suggests that the first topics were rejected as unsatisfactory, primarily on moral grounds. The experience in Rome and its importance are re-examined and attention is drawn to the emphasis on moral values in certain writings undertaken as he approached his chosen subject.

Part II looks first, in chapter five, at the moral categories underlying The Decline and Fall and, in the following chapter, at their application in Gibbon's approach to character and the historian's responsibility to truth, to his public and to posterity for the faithfulness of his portraits of the figures of history. Some of these persons are seen as uniquely appropriate to Gibbon's purpose and the moral values he wished his History to exemplify. Chapter seven explores the moral emphases seen in his discussion of the causes of decline and in particular proposes that the twin factors of barbarism and religion are presented in The Decline and Fall as primarily moral rather than racial or religious
categories. The question as to how far the philosophic historian and moralist does justice to religion and to his avowed ideal of strict impartiality is finally considered. Chapter eight examines a major theme of the work as it looks at Gibbon the humanist moralising on the strange and melancholy 'vicissitudes of fortune', the transitoriness of the life of man, his works and his empires, and on the value of history as the means of transcending this impermanence, this inevitable change and decay. Chapter nine focuses on the historian's use of language as an appropriate vehicle for his moral reading of history, and moves from the broader aspects of style, through the units of composition, to the choice of words, in order to show how Gibbon forged a suitable instrument for his purpose. The final chapter discusses the ambiguity of the historian's reputation in former times and particularly his standing as a moralist in view of the 'indecencies' and 'improprieties' found in his work by his contemporaries and later critics. The question of how far this affects his moral stature is considered and the relative insignificance of this element and the lasting appreciation of The Decline and Fall, not only on literary and historical grounds, but also for its positive moral value, is reaffirmed. The individual chapter outlines indicate more clearly and in greater detail the thread of the presentation and the argument throughout the thesis.
INTRODUCTION

Historians of the stature of Gibbon continue to attract critical attention and numerous aspects of their work become the subject of separate studies. So many facets of the man and his History have been examined that there might seem little left to say. But strangely for a writer whose moral comments and outlook have been so frequently referred to, this particular aspect at least seems to have escaped closer and more detailed examination. Yet when we approach his work from this point of view we find a rich vein to be explored. The references to the moral view of history amongst eighteenth-century writers, and of Gibbon in particular, though by now a commonplace, usually consist of no more than a few passing remarks or a short section of a chapter.

If this is so then the present study is warranted for Gibbon is one of those writers who seem to mark a watershed in the practice of history. Hence we have a set of studies of his problem after two hundred years presented by Lynn White and his collaborators or more recently, in a symposium on *The Age of Spirituality* Arnaldo Momigliano's contribution entitled quite simply, 'After Gibbon's Decline and Fall', almost as if a sort of B.C.-A.D. division dates from that work. For us, then, who live in the 'after Gibbon' period, it seems that The Decline and Fall like other peaks, both in historical writing and in the real world, challenge us to explore them simply because they are there.

My own fields of study, apart from an early piece of research on Pacific history, have been the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, both the English language in those periods and various historical questions. My research for the present thesis began by bringing these two together in an investigation of eighteenth-century attitudes to the Middle Ages, particularly on the part of historians: 'History and the Gothic past in eighteenth-century England and France'; then it turned in another direction to consider the use made of history by some of the notable religious writers and apologists of the day, like Prideaux, Lardner, Jortin, MacKnight and others with whom Gibbon was familiar and whose works he acknowledged in his notes. Eventually my research returned to the central and dominant figure, acknowledged by Trevor-Roper as still 'greatest of historians', for I found there was one important aspect of the man and his masterpiece largely unexplored: Gibbon as moralist and the moral categories and emphases of The Decline and Fall, which has more than once been considered as a historical Paradise Lost.

1. Also Archibald Maclaine whose standard English translation of Gibbon's important source, Mosheim's Ecclesiastical History is in the Bentick Street catalogue of his library.
CHAPTER OUTLINES

PART I. THE HISTORIAN

CHAPTER ONE. THE BEGINNING OF SELF-AWARENESS AND ENLIGHTENMENT

History in the moralist tradition - the historian's responsibility as seen by Tacitus and Gibbon. Broad classification of 'moral subjects' and moral causes in Hume ...

Place and value of Journal and Memoirs in tracing Gibbon's attitudes and moral development. The Memoirs a valid source, with certain cautions and critical reservations ...

Gibbon's early conviction of a vocation for history. His reading on the subject and in particular on the period he was later to make his own ...

Antithesis as a feature of Gibbon's work - early illustration in his reactions to Oxford and Lausanne ...

Oxford and his search for intellectual and moral authority - his study of church history. Significance of this study and of his 'conversion' ...

Lausanne and the moral value of his apprenticeship there. Beginnings of moral choice and awareness. Foundations of later research. Gradual freedom from prejudice discerned. Suspension of further religious inquiry - comparison with Bayle as 'truly protestant' in his opposition to all 'superstitions' alike ...

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CHAPTER TWO. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND MORAL GROWTH

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Love and friendship - two models offered by Gibbon:
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(ii) Suzanne Curchod - emphasis on love as 'a pure and exalted sentiment'. The three persons involved in this relationship. Interpretation of Gibbon's famous last words on the affair ...

Gibbon's relationship with his father in this and other situations - moral tests of desire versus duty ...

Lesson learnt from his love affair - disabused by 'artful' conduct; moral reaction against 'duplicit'. Sets pattern for Gibbon's style of single life, both sociable and scholarly. Absence of resentment and life-long friendship with Suzanne ...

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Further moral assessments of character: Wilkes, Worsley. A moralist's reaction to early instances of dissipation and to the baser sides of military life. His militia experience turned to good effect - his thoroughness and sense of duty ...

Ideals of service reflected in Gibbon's speech to the electors of Petersfield and in a letter to his father at this time ...

Gibbon's idea of the importance of oratory and the moral responsibility of the orator: significance of this anticipating the 'oration' of The Decline and Fall. Gibbon's eloquence to be exercised not in the Commons but in the writing of history.

Mathematics or Homer - a final choice in favour of what Gibbon saw as 'the finer feelings' and moral instruction of 'the father of poetry' ...

CHAPTER THREE  THE STATUE IN THE MARBLE

Gibbon's Essai as a first trial of strength: both a beginning and an end - the fruit of his development in Lausanne. Formative books and reflection ...

Reception of the Essai. Its style and treatment - too disjointed and derivative. Significant, however, for its statement of principles and aims. Its affirmation of the value of classical scholarship. Another antithesis: humane studies versus the tyranny of the new physical science. The place of criticism and the role of the critic. Moral responsibility of an author ...

'L'esprit philosophique' as a key to the writing of history: the penetration and discernment necessary for the study of men and peoples - beneath diversity of beliefs, finding the source of morals always the same; getting inside the people of earlier times...

Marks of the philosophic historian: sees in history not mere chance but causes and effects; can distinguish those which initiate actions; perceives the significance of trivial and involuntary acts in revealing the real character of a man; sense of proportion and relative importance of actions and events ...

In delineating his ideal of the philosophic historian, Gibbon distinguished three grades of historical writers leaving no doubt which one he aspired to. Concern with moral causation but without absolute determinism - importance of moral choices - danger of sacrificing freedom of interpretation to hypotheses and systems. Exciting prospect of applying the theory of 'general causes' in a truly 'philosophic history of man'. Various factors behind the greatness and fall of empires...

Here are all the elements to inspire the future historian of the Roman Empire - a new Montesquieu? Value of 'human manners' for displaying the principles at work in history. Ressorts - 'the springs of action' - central to this philosophic history of man. The Essai thus contains the theoretical statement of principles later illustrated in The Decline and Fall, e.g. moral causes, liberty, the study of motives, moral choice. Gibbon proposing 'a science of human nature', its common principles to be discovered in the study of history - a parallel with Hume...

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Why did Gibbon look away from ancient topics at this time? Possible explanation...

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Suspension of both these satisfying themes in preparation for his Italian tour. Are they to be seen as parts of the 'great problem' of the Middle Ages and the continuity of history? Significance of Gibbon's preparatory study and of his travelling library...

The type of history Gibbon must write: majestic, useful as well as entertaining, but never superficial; accurate, impartial and instructive - surely best illustrated in the fall of empires. Contemporary pyrrhonism and general preference for modern history. Dangers inherent in modern topics - partisanship and making of enemies...

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The Italian tour and the experience in Rome - the needed inspiration for 'the historian of the Roman Empire'. Critical evaluation of the famous statement in the Memoirs. Permanence of this vision - its translation into the History delayed by circumstances. His interim projects...

'Digression on the Character of Brutus': an illuminating moral judgement on a historical character. Two Swiss pieces, both to do with liberty: 'Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne' and 'Introduction à l'Histoire générale de la République des Suisses'...

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PART II. THE HISTORY

CHAPTER FIVE. MORAL CATEGORIES OF THE DECLINE AND FALL

Adequacy of this subject to convey the moral categories Gibbon saw in history...

His use of 'philosophy', 'philosopher': pragmatic appeals to 'philosophy' and 'morality'. His notion of 'virtue' essentially humanistic - 'deduced from the nature of man'. As 'philosopher' or 'impartial spectator' the historian is never cold or detached but always involved in mankind. Gibbon's notion of the truly philosophic historian and his responsibility reiterated: an exact presentation of facts and whatever is worthy of praise, blame, or excuse; obligation to truth; instruction drawn from 'a fair parallel of the vices and virtues' of his characters...

General Categories observable in the work:

I. Primary obligation to 'THE TRUTH OF HISTORY'
   Two aspects: (a) accuracy regarding facts
   (b) faithful presentation of persons and periods
   Gibbon's insistence on diligence and accuracy - criticism of Voltaire and other historians for failures in these requirements. Reciprocal relation: the larger truth of history dependent on an accurate foundation of fact; but it, in turn, can be used by the 'philosophic historian' to interpret and even 'correct' facts in his sources. Testing of particular details against the general weight of evidence. The canon of consistency...

II. 'THE KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN NATURE'
   This underlying study of mankind and discernment of human nature gives a moral coherence to The Decline and Fall. Gibbon's fundamental concern is with man - his manners, morals and motives. 'The proper study of mankind is man' true for the historian. His knowledge of human nature (a) guards him against moral inconsistencies, and also (b) enables him to discover or infer hidden motives...

III. 'THE JUDGEMENT OF POSTERITY'
   The historian's duty to transmit an accurate and faithful record as the basis of posterity's judgement. The historian, like his characters, answerable before this tribunal. Hence the need for impartiality: 'the impartial historian' becomes the spokesman in this tribunal. This responsibility led to Gibbon's careful consideration of each case on its merits - degrees of culpability assessed. The question of the propriety of moral judgements by historians. Gibbon's sense of duty to see justice done to the figures of the past. Impartiality therefore essential but this does not mean aloofness...

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V. MORAL CAUSES AND EFFECTS
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VI. THE INSTRUCTIVE VALUE OF HISTORY
The historian's obligation to instruct as well as entertain. In this context 'manners' will be found more instructive than political and military events. This moral aim justifies the inclusion of what might otherwise seem digressions from the narrative, e.g. the chapter on the character and code of Justinian. The historian's instructive purpose thus influences his selection of material. The use of instructive parallels and analogies between ancient and modern times. The myth of Rome's fall a powerful influence in eighteenth-century England. The moral of it a possible lesson to Britain. Certainly an obvious warning on the need to safeguard political liberty against the threat of autocracy.

The Decline and Fall as in part 'a moral tale' - 'wisdom and virtue', 'ancient liberty', a specious 'golden age', corruption of character and society. From this viewpoint it is also a secular Paradise Lost in terms of the failure of the greatest civilization and of its 'life of virtue': the fall of man from a state of intellectual and political freedom into servitude and barbarism. Moral unity of the work. Gibbon's analogy between history and heroic poetry - the chorus in the epic providing 'a perpetual moral commentary' on the action.

CHAPTER SIX THE TRUE COUNSELS AND CHARACTERS OF MEN
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Examination of each of these standards.
Vital importance of the motive in discovering the true character: examples - Constantine and Julian. Gibbon's consistent concern with motives and 'the true counsels' of his historical persons. Interpretation of actions in terms of underlying motives. Motives and character in reciprocal relation in Gibbon's studies:
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Gibbon saw his impartial approach as rectifying traditional and unbalanced judgements - the need for reappraisals

Criteria for assessment of character to satisfy the moral categories of The Decline and Fall - impartial and fair, because relative. Gibbon's use of this relative standard - judging the man against his age and society; this can also reveal virtues or vices hidden by circumstances from the casual reader

Testing claims to greatness - based on 'true character' and the contribution to the welfare of mankind. Examples: Justinian and Charlemagne

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The former of Gibbon's famous statements on the fall of Rome - 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness.' Moderation and excess. In the moral sphere a certain inevitability about the decline of Rome as portrayed by Gibbon

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The divorce of religion from morality the key to Gibbon's case against the Church. It seemed not only to have failed to produce 'the good life' as understood by Gibbon and the Roman moralists, but even to have overturned the whole scale of moral values by
(a) exalting the trivial and irrelevant at the expense of the essential and the useful
(b) replacing real with 'specious' and 'monkish' virtues
(c) raising a priestly caste and hierarchy above ordinary morality and substituting rites for moral requirements so that baptism, penance, pilgrimage, and religious foundations marked the triumph of religion over morality
(d) using unworthy or immoral means to achieve a desired end - persecution, forced conversions, holy wars, especially the Crusades.

A base conception of God as a prime cause of this divorce - the Jewish legacy. Christian exclusiveness consigned to eternal punishment the wisest and best of Greece and Rome, thus denying the worth of pagan virtue. Islam similarly exclusive and fanatical. ...

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(b) On the credit side: courage and incorruptibility of certain noble 'saints', beneficial effect on the barbarians of the north, civilizing influence in the dark ages.

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More appaling to Gibbon and to Poggio than the physical ruins were the ruin of liberty and former greatness, moral decay and inner collapse. Sentiments shared by the two humanist observers...

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(e) symbolic of corruption and decay of ideals and life in the Roman Empire - the death of the greatest civilization...

A comparison with Diderot's moral reaction to ruins - ideas shared by the two writers...

The most basic notion of inner decay and collapse similarly conveyed by the metaphor of 'fabric'. Ruins and the fundamental 'problem of decadence' which they suggest. The Decline and Fall as including elements from Gibbon's earlier projected subjects. The moralist's viewpoint clear in his judgements and his exposure of degeneracy - the connection between 'national vice and ruin'...

CHAPTER NINE. THE LANGUAGE OF THE MORALIST

Introductory: Gibbon's strong feeling for language and care in its use. His remarks on styles of historians as a guide to the qualities he looked for in historical writing. Such qualities exemplified in his own work...

Stylistic description of The Decline and Fall:
(a) 'Style' - precise and dignified, yet simple as opposed to the ornate and grandiloquent styles Gibbon avoided.
(b) 'Tone' - the 'middle tone' between that of the dull chronicle and rhetorical declamation

(c) 'Intonation' - various effects such as irony, sarcasm, doubt, open or conclusive statement

Structural units of composition: THEME
   CHAPTER - or group of chapters
   PARAGRAPH
   SENTENCE and its components
   WORD

Use of the general or moral truth in the paragraph or series of paragraphs. Gibbon's paragraphs often based on such generalisations. These sometimes express, sometimes merely imply a moral judgement for the reader to apply. The general statement may introduce, or may follow as a conclusion, the specific details in the paragraph. Grammatical markers of this - a switch to the present tense and sometimes to the first person, 'we'. Instances of the author speaking in his own person, or as an 'impartial philosopher', or through the appropriate words of a person in the narrative. Use of personified qualities, or virtues and vices, as the responsible agents in a moral comment or generalisation

The sentence level: syntactic organisation - parallelism, antithesis, accumulation, climax or anti-climax, co-ordination. Usefulness of some of these devices in emphasising moral truths. Various effects obtained by such syntactic arrangements. Use of co-ordinate structures to offer a suggestive or moral comment. A special use of co-ordinates in the characteristic Gibbonian couplets linked by 'and' and 'or' - the aim and effect of these doublets: the 'used and abused' type

four types of the 'or' doublet and their value in questioning motives or the genuineness of a reaction

Word level: first person pronouns - occasional voice of the moralist speaking directly to the reader. Gibbon's fondness for phrasal synonyms, often for moral effect. Antithetical epithets suggesting moral incongruity. Specific reflections on the abuse of language. Terms of moral comment or judgement - 'just', 'deserved', 'unworthy'. The vocabulary of decline - some terms like 'corruption' and 'degenerate' and derivatives which have strong moral force. Gibbon's care not to obscure his statements by metaphorical expression or substitute rhetoric for fact

Gibbon's most characteristic tone of irony. His study of Juvenal turned to good effect. His 'dismissive irony' in contrast to the satire of Swift. Gibbon's irony intended to affirm not to destroy the moral values of his age
CHAPTER TEN. AN INCONSISTENT MORALIST?

The charges of 'irreligion' and 'indecenty' in Gibbon's work coloured the reputation of the historian. Porson's balanced encomium, but strong objection to the 'indecencies' he found in The Decline and Fall. Consideration of his criticism ... 564

Controversial replies to Gibbon concentrated almost entirely on the religious element - his treatment of Christianity. Continuing clamour and often extreme reactions against his 'improprieties' ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 567

Two comments on an author's intention relevant to the case:
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(b) Bayle's comments 'Concerning Obscenities' ... ... ... 569

Close examination of Porson's specific charge. What is the tone and effect of the instances of rape? Do the passages suggest callousness or prurience? Little evidence of lack of humanity in these instances. More substance perhaps in the charge of indifference to the persecution of Christians. Porson's balanced judgement - 'a few freckles' ... ... ... 572

Bowdler's edition. His aim and methods. Instances of offending passages. Lack of consistency in his treatment and expurgations. Difficulty of obtaining an accurate idea of the extent of his objections since his deletions were made largely on the grounds of irreligion and irrelevance ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 579

Edition published by Frederick Warne and Co. a safer guide since it was advertised as a 'verbatim reprint' and omitted nothing on grounds of irrelevance as did Bowdler's. Examination of passages omitted from this edition ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 585

Editorial attitudes and inconsistencies. 'Moral' criteria for expurgation not related to the tone or intent of the whole passage. Moral mutilations to certain passages by these editors resulting in the actual loss of Gibbon's moral point ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 588

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(b) What is the author's general intent?
(c) Is the work likely to corrupt those for whom it was intended? A parallel from the Lady Chatterley obscenity trial ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 604

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