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

David Dillon-Smith

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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

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

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

Department of History
1982
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'.
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.\(^1\) 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.

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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.
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Two aspects: (a) accuracy regarding facts (b) faithful presentation of persons and periods

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(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.

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His continued connection of the Church with imperial decline. The 'neo-pagans' and their charges against the primitive Christians as members of society. The Church as 'cancer' or 'chrysalis'? Recent historians divided as to the Church's part in the decline of Rome. Tendency to see its positive contribution to the emerging civilization. Certain moral advances clearly due to Christian influence. Connection between religion and morality, in fact, closer than in religions generally and quite novel in ancient pagan world. ...

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(b) transience of men and empires - a 'melancholy' prospect.
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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.

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