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

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NOTE

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CONCLUSION

The last word on the historian as moralist was said by Gibbon himself and it is that with which we began: his statement of the historian's obligation to himself, to the present, and to posterity, to present a truthful record of the times and persons for praise, excuse, or censure, \(^1\) though he admitted that he and his clerical opponents did not 'entertain the same notions of moral virtue.' \(^2\) His dedication to historical truth obliged him never to 'conceal, by his own disgrace, that of his country, or of his religion.' \(^3\) That was his expression of his commitment and intention. His application of it, both to Rome and, by implication at least, to his own country, was equally clear to his contemporaries. Fox, whose moral character did not escape Gibbon's censure, \(^4\) seems to have written in his copy of The Decline and Fall, those lines which not only make this connection but also administer a rebuke to the parliamentary

placeman:

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<th>Line</th>
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<tr>
<td>King George in a fright</td>
<td>How corruption and bribes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lest Gibbon should write</td>
<td>O'erthrew the great empire of Rome;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The story of Britain's disgrace....</td>
<td>And his writings declare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A degeneracy there</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Which his conduct exhibits at home.</td>
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Whatever in Gibbon and his work deserves to be praised, excused, or censured, has been amply brought to light by writers from his day to ours, and those who have given him highest praise have also admitted

\(^1\) 'Vindication', MW, IV, 631, quoted above, chapter I, p.l.  
\(^2\) ibid., p. 605.  
\(^3\) ibid., p. 631.  
\(^4\) See above, chapter II, p. 66.
weaknesses and limitations. But on that particular aspect of his work which is the subject of this study, both his intention and his practice are unmistakable, as I think has been sufficiently shown. In the words of C.V. Wedgwood: 'He assumes that it is the right and duty of the historian to have a clearly defined moral attitude and he is exquisitely skilful in introducing judgement by way of implication.... Gibbon's just and generous admiration is reserved for those who best display the classic virtues: justice, fortitude, perseverance, moderation. He greatly admires cleverness but never for itself alone. His morality, classical again in this, did not permit him to respect success unless it was allied with these virtues.' No one denies him his title as a historian: as moralist his claim is equally certain.