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

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CHAPTER IV
A SUBJECT FIT FOR HISTORY

In his Essai Gibbon had set down some theoretical principles which should guide the philosophical historian in his selection and use of facts, his discernment of moral causes and effects, and his study of human nature. He now needed a subject which would give him ample scope to put these principles into practice. During his military service he was writing and revising parts of the Essai and preparing it for the press.1 Its ideas were therefore in his mind, when about the time of his twenty-fourth birthday, he began a careful consideration of topics on which he might write.2

What does he tell us? First, that he is still committed to history as his special field. With some years of critical reading behind him, he reaffirmed his youthful aspiration: 'My own inclination as well as the taste of the present age, have made me decide in favour of history. Convinced of its merit, my reason cannot blush at the choice.'3 But had he the abilities, he wondered. If not he might turn out to be no more than 'a mere chronicler or compiler of gazettes', a role in his eyes as contemptible as that of historian was worthy of honour. How could he discover his potentialities and try his strength?

1. See JA, 23 April & 10 June, 1761, pp. 24-5; p. 100.
2. Shortly before his birthday, he wrote of 'having thought of several subjects for an Historical composition' (JA, 14 April, 1751 p. 24). Beginning the story of his life in the Memoirs Gibbon gives his birthday as 'the 27th of April, O.S.' but in his Journal for 1762 he refers to the 8th of May as 'my birthday', i.e. N.S. (Memoirs, p. 24; JA, p. 69.)
3. 'Hints of some Subjects fit for History', dated 'Camp near Winchester, 26 July, 1761' (MW, V, 487).
This was the question which prompted his 'Hints of some Subjects fit for History', certain further deliberation recorded in his Journal, and an early work which emerged from the exercise that same year, namely 'Critical Researches concerning the Title of Charles VII to the Crown of Naples'. Methodical as ever, he decided to list certain topics he considered promising, weigh their relative merits, and then research them for a trial period. Their very importance would at least, he felt, ensure the value of the study and compensate for any failure in the performance.

To Gibbon at this stage, it was his vocation rather than the topic that was crucial. He would test his claim to be considered a historian and not 'a mere chronicler' by actually writing history: the topic was the means to this end. For us, however, the chief interest lies in his process of selection and rejection because of the light it throws not only upon his historical interests and assessment of sources but also upon his moral judgement.

Before turning to the particular topics there is one question which seems to arise from them all. While they represent a reaffirmation of Gibbon's early feeling of vocation for history, they also show his first definite attempt to find historical inspiration in directions other than the ancient past. Why, we may ask, at the very time when he confirmed his choice of history as a discipline, was he diverted from his great subject to others, both medieval and modern, and mostly English rather than Roman? It may be suggested that having recently attained intellectual

maturity in a climate of lumières and 'modern' historians, he was more prepared to illustrate his ideas, such as those on causation, from whatever period of history offered the best materials. Perhaps less distant times with a wealth of relatively accessible materials might offer the greatest scope to a young historian. The fact that Gibbon rejected his first two topics partly on account of their being too 'remote' from his own time may seem to add plausibility to this notion. But though he entertained thoughts of more recent topics at this point, there is no indication that he shared the current view of writers like Voltaire that all worthwhile history is essentially modern history.¹ And throughout this whole period of historical searching, his reading as reflected in his Journal continued to be predominantly in the ancient classics and their critics.²

There seems to be a simple and reasonable explanation why Gibbon looked away from the ancient past for a fresh topic. His intention was primarily, as he pointed out, to test his powers as a historian. Why try to do so by working over the well-ploughed fields of Greece and Rome in competition with so many eminent scholars, when he could better assess his own achievement in comparatively virgin soil? This was at least a determining factor in relinquishing his most promising English

1. See Voltaire's article HISTOIRE in the Encyclopédie (Paris, 1755 tome 8, p. 223, col. 1). His view was confirmed by his own concentration on modern subjects. Bolingbroke also would concentrate on modern history which seemed 'more entire as well as more authentic' than a good deal of ancient history ('Letters on the Study and Use of History', (Collected Works, London, 1844), vol. II, p. 223; cf. also vol. II, pp. 186 and 211-2).

2. Apart from the reading of Greek and Roman authors and works about them, Gibbon composed a considerable critical piece of 30 folio pages on Hurd's Horace; see JA, 8 Feb.; 18 March, 1762, pp. 45, 49; and MW, IV, 113-152.
subject, Raleigh, which at first sight seemed to have 'such a quantity of materials as I desired and which had not yet been properly made use of'. However, after looking into it more deeply, and especially after reading Oldys' *Life*, he came to the conclusion: 'Excepting some anecdotes lately revealed in the Sidney and Bacon Papers I know not what I should be able to add'. Even when he thought of dealing with the times rather than the man himself, he still saw little chance to prove himself in breaking new ground, because these were 'the periods of English history which have been the most variously illustrated' by eminent writers. Asking himself, 'what new lights could I reflect on a subject' so adequately covered by many accomplished men, he decided to look elsewhere.

Yet, though this may have been, in the negative sense, a convincing reason for young Gibbon to avoid Roman themes even while his reading kept them before his eyes, there is a more positive factor, the crucial factor of experience. Though the thread of Rome ran right through his early thinking and research, it still took the physical experience of the forum and a sight of the hub of empire for him to appreciate his special calling. This is yet another, though the supreme instance, of the importance of 'place' in Gibbon's career. Just as he had come to see that moral choices could only be made on the basis of experience, so for Gibbon 'it was the view of Italy and Rome which determined the choice of the subject.' This visit was doubly valuable for one so

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1. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30.
graphic in his physical descriptions of terrain, of battles and of places, and for whom geography and topography formed so important a preparatory study to his tour. Rome became to him a living reality in those days of October 1764. Here his thoughts echoed those of the humanist Poggio Bracciolini, whom he followed at a distance of three centuries to the same vantage point of the Capitoline hill. That it was the living heart of empire he perceived, may be inferred from his reference to 'the ruins of the Capitol', which at that date he could only have seen with the eyes of his historical imagination.

Gibbon began his search for a historical topic directly after the revision and publication of his Essai. Its treatment of moral causation and moral values must therefore have been still in the front of his mind, and we would expect such moral criteria to have influenced his choice of a worthy subject and his rejection of those which fell short of his ideal. In the cases where he has elaborated on these subjects that is precisely what we find.

After considering several topics, his first choice was 'the expedition of Charles VIII of France into Italy.' About six years earlier he had read Giannone's Civil History of Naples and later

1. The version of his famous sentence in fragments 'C' and 'E' mention the 'ruins', while that in 'D' has simply 'musing on the Capitol'. In 1764, as Bonnard points out, 'the Capitol was already what it now is'. (Notes to Memoirs, p. 305.) See Piranesi's etchings of Gibbon's Rome; also J.J. Saunders, 'Gibbon in Rome 1764'. History Today, XIV, 9 Sept. 1964, pp. 608ff.

2. JA, Buriton, 14 April, 1761 (also in Memoirs, p. 119).
singly it out as one of three books which 'may have remotely contributed to form the historian of the Roman Empire'. ¹ This reference in the Memoirs seems to indicate an indelible impression on the young man, and Giannone's direct influence in inspiring this first subject can be accepted.²

This expedition of Charles VIII at first appeared to Gibbon to be a great event in history and the king a notable figure. It is interesting to observe that at this stage he had his eye on prominent persons or 'heroes' rather than on movements or periods and that so much of The Decline and Fall also clusters round such heroes or anti-heroes as Constantine, Julian, Belisarius, Mahomet and Athanasius.

There, as H.L. Bond points out, 'individual actors occupy the forefront of the stage to play their heroic, their comic, or their tragic roles...and they retire leaving to others the continuation of the ever-changing drama'.²

As he scrutinised Charles and his expedition more closely Gibbon came to feel that this subject was not only 'too remote from us' but also that it lacked the intrinsic greatness it first seemed to possess, being 'rather an introduction to great events than great and important in itself.'⁴ However, in accordance with his plan for assessing his

1. JA, December 1755 (Memoirs, p. 79); see above, chap. III, pp. 52 and n. 4. Giannone, the leading Italian historian of the 18th century, had escaped for a time the wrath of the church, by taking refuge in the tolerant security of Switzerland.
2. It is pointed out by Trevor-Roper, 'The Idea of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' in Barber, et.al., The Age of the Enlightenment, p. 425, n. 13: 'Giannone's direct influence has been shown by Signor Giarizzo (Edward Gibbon e la cultura europa del settecento, Naples, 1954), pp. 136, 209'.
4. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30.
topics, he read widely on the subject, then wrote a preliminary disser­tation of ten folio pages on Charles' title to the throne of Naples.¹

In this short piece we find, besides a specific examination of the king's claims, certain more fundamental moral obligations. Gibbon commented for example, on the need for punishment to protect the public welfare, this being the real purpose of the laws 'which reason has dictated to all nations'.² Yet he admitted the cruelty of the punishment which condemns 'to perpetual ignominy the unhappy bastard'. The guilt is that of the princes, not the sons, for 'in those ages, as wicked as they were ignorant, princes disgraced themselves by a life of profligacy'.³ Then, after setting out the titles of each contender to the crown, Gibbon explicitly stated what he was later frequently to assume in The Decline and Fall, that he must leave the final judgement to the decision of his reader. 'It belongs to the reader to pronounce sentence...I pretend not to decide'.⁴ However, his summing up of the crucial points for the guidance of his jury, again laid stress on some basic moral considerations: 'The right of conquest, an odious right, fit only to make illustrious criminals... The consent of the subject, the fairest of all titles'. And his

¹ 'Critical Researches concerning the title of Charles VIII to the Crown of Naples', MW, III, 206-222. In a footnote (p.206) Gibbon adds: 'I meditate a history of the expedition of Charles VIII into Italy; an event which changed the face of Europe. Should I ever undertake such a work, these researches will find their place in it, but written with more care and precision'.
² Cf. DF, xliiv, IV, 487, and Cicero's observation that 'reason prescribes the law of nature and nations'.
³ MW, III, 211.
⁴ ibid., III, 221; and see below.
final comment is: 'The right of conquest is only made for wild beasts. The laws of succession, though well contrived in themselves, are destitute of fixed principles. The only title not liable to objection, is the consenting voice of a free people'. Thus, in the light of this preliminary examination of the French king, this 'hero' must have appeared to Gibbon as morally flawed, pursuing his 'odious right' of conquest in violation of popular consent. He must have appeared immoral as a destroyer of Renaissance civilization.

With this note of disgust, Gibbon turned from Charles to a series of English 'heroes'. They probably reflect his attempt to make himself an Englishman once more after his sojourn abroad. His first work, written in French, had been received with enthusiasm across the Channel, but had met with a cold reception at home. 'I should have escaped some anti-Gallican clamour', he admitted, 'had I been content with with the more natural character of an English author'. Strangely, it was during his Swiss exile that he had been introduced to English authors like Locke and also found in certain French writers an admiration for things English. 'C'est peut-être le paradoxe le plus amusant de la vie de Gibbon', writes Baridon, 'qu'il ait découvert

1. ibid., III, pp. 221-2. We recall Gibbon's comment on his reading of Cicero in Lausanne and his recommendation of this author to any liberal scholar, 'I breathed the spirit of freedom, and I imbibed from his precepts and examples the public and private sense of a man'. (Memoirs, 'C', p. 75 and n. 7.)
2. See above, chap. II, pp. 39, 43. Not that he ever really did become an Englishman; he remained more European, and somewhat outside of English society.
3. 'In England it was received with cold indifference, little read and speedily forgotten'. (Memoirs, p. 102). Gibbon even refused his printer's request for a new edition when the fame of The Decline and Fall had created a ready market for the Essai.
l'Angleterre en Suisse et grâce à la France. Sa biographie montre qu'il a lu Locke à Lausanne dont Voltaire disait en 1754: "On y parle français, on y pense à l'anglaise"; il y lut aussi ce même Voltaire, Fréret et Montesquieu... tous devaient tant à l'anglomanie de l'époque qu'ils lui ont fait retrouver à l'étranger le problèmes auxquels il voulait se dérober quant il était dans son pays'.

Despite a continuing regard for Montesquieu, Gibbon's historical models were not French, but English; not Voltaire or Vertot but Robertson and Hume, and it was to Hume's *History of England* that he kept turning.

While, till recently, Gibbon lamented, Britain had been sadly lacking in real historians, this reproach, he rejoiced to say, had at least been removed by the worthy pair of northern historians, whom he eventually realised he had joined to form 'the triumvirate'. When, therefore, he referred to *The Reign of Henry VII*, 'just published', as 'ingenious but superficial' this apparent faint praise suggests that

2. Apart from a couple of references in DF (xxxviii, IV, 161, 168) and JB (1er Novembre, 1764, pp. 122, 126) to this author, Gibbon showed an early admiration for the Abbé by using his *Histoire des revolutions de la republique romaine* (1719) as a model 'most approved for purity and elegance of style' in his exercises in retranslation (Memoirs, p. 75). He also enthusiastically described one of his most promising subjects as 'a chain of revolutions worthy the pen of Vertot'. (JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 104).
3. See e.g. JA, 4 and 13 August, 1761, pp. 30, 32.
5. JA, 2 November, 1761, p. 42. This must be read bearing in mind Gibbon's usual high praise for Hume, e.g. the original philosophical genius' with reference to the 2nd volume of Hume's *History* (cf. JA, 4 August, 1761 and 26 July, 1762). In the Memoirs, this phrase became 'the impartial philosophy of Hume' (p. 121).
his admired author's last volumes swept over a great span of English history too summarily to look beneath the surface and thus lacked the moral penetration expected of the philosopher. Perhaps Gibbon felt that he himself would like to probe more deeply some of those historical figures whose characters and motives Hume seemed to have treated too superficially. At all events, he obviously believed that as an Englishman, he could find in the history of his own country, notable persons still not adequately treated, and that these would allow him to try his powers of historical writing. Thus of his next seven subjects for consideration, six were English and one Scottish. The English 'heroes' included Richard I, the Black Prince and Henry V from earlier times and from a more recent period, Sidney and Raleigh. ¹ The biographical emphasis is significant not only as a preview of The Decline and Fall ² but also in terms of Gibbon's historical apprenticeship. There was, of course, as Jordan reminds us, the example of Plutarch and the various 'Lives' so popular amongst Augustan readers in England. ³ But the aspiring historian must also have sensed the advantage of having a human unifying centre for his writing. Gibbon was acquainted with Bolingbroke's belief that 'Man is the subject of every history...History therefore of all kinds...that descends to a sufficient detail of human actions and characters, is useful to bring us acquainted with our species, nay with ourselves'. ⁴

¹. The other topics were, 'the barons wars against John and Henry III' and Montrose. Henry V was considered in a comparison with Titus (JA, 4 Aug. 1761, p. 30).
². See above, chap. VI on Gibbon's treatment of character.
³. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 99. One might add the 'histories' of one whom Gibbon considered 'a great master', Henry Fielding: The History of...Joseph Andrews, The History of...Johnathan Wild, and The History of Tom Jones, the last 'which may be considered as the history of human nature' (DF, xxxii, III, 384, n.13).
⁴. 'Letters on the Study and Use of History' (Works, II, 229).
Avoiding what seemed in Hume a superficial treatment, the philosophical historian would achieve not only a 'moral' and humanistic piece of writing but one whose human centre gave it coherence. 'Gibbon first looked to biography as providing that principle of organisation which he hoped would give coherence to the past. He had rejected all the deductive schemes of his day, and he believed a biographical approach to the past would fill the gap. In the first place he had a profound humanistic conviction that man is the object of history, and what could be more obvious than writing the history of one man. All of the technical problems Gibbon had noticed in the work of others - Voltaire's habit of separating out the various aspects of history into separate chapters, Montesquieu's disregard for the role of individuals in history - might be solved by a biographical approach.'

It is instructive to note the reasons Gibbon gave for the choice of his first English topic, Richard I and his crusade. They were not primarily rational though justified on rational grounds. This subject made its first appeal to the imagination: 'alluring by the marvellous. A king of England at the head of an allied army of English and French under the walls of Ascalon!' But as a test case, a subject on which to try his abilities as an historian, what did it have to offer? Here rationality entered and pointed out the 'good materials for executing such an undertaking'. They were 'good' because they were contemporary and accurate and, 'what is of great importance to the lover of truth', because the leading primary sources were to be found on each of the opposing sides and thus afforded every chance of impartiality, a

2. 'Hints', MW., IV, 488.
quality Gibbon held to be essential for the historian.¹

However alluring the subject and however adequate the sources, Richard did not satisfy Gibbon for long. Like the rest of the British set, with the exception of Raleigh, he was soon rejected, not to be heard of again. A deeper look convinced Gibbon that this English hero's moral stature fell far short of his common fame let alone the high standards of the historian. 'This Richard was a fit hero only for monks. With the ferocity of a gladiator, he united the cruelty of a tyrant; and both were unsuccessfully employed in a cause where superstition silenced religion, justice, and policy; and against one of the most accomplished princes in history. How little are we interested in the exploits of Richard'.² In his search for subjects 'fit for history', the philosophic historian had discovered one fit only for 'the monkish historians' who were prepared to glorify superstition and cruelty in the cause of religion. Gibbon was surely coming to agree with Fielding's estimate of the popular concept of 'greatness' wherein many of the 'great' men both past and present turn out to be the bad ones; they were in fact merely great rogues.³

1. e.g. in DF praise for 'the impartial historian', and for the quality of impartiality, xxii, II, 443, n.52; xxvi, III, 116, n. 93; xlvi, V, 69; xlvii, V, 144, n. 90.
2. 'Hints', MW, V, 488. Readers of DF feel the scorn and the contempt Gibbon put into the word 'monks' and his revulsion at gladiatorial shows and the participants. 'A monkish historian', he wrote (lix, Vi, 374) 'would have been content to applaud the most despicable part of his character. (St. Louis and his crusade are being discussed.)
Both in 'Outlines of the History of the World', probably written about 1771, and in The Decline and Fall begun about two years later, this early judgement on Richard and his crusade is endorsed. In the former, Gibbon wrote, 'Richard the First...possessed only the personal courage of a soldier...The crusade and captivity of Richard exhausted England and impoverished the crown'. The whole work contains only this and one other brief mention of the English 'hero'. In The Decline and Fall Gibbon's comment is, 'If heroism be confined to brutal and ferocious valour, Richard Plantagenet will stand high among the heroes of the age'. This nicely sums up the original judgement recorded in his 'Hints' and exposes the vulgar notion of 'heroism', not confined to the common people alone, but unfortunately shared by the general run of historians. Nor could the whole crusading movement inspire any more respect. The 'ferocious valour' of the hero was but part of the general 'epidemical disease'; 'the principle of the crusades was a savage fanaticism'. Behind 'the folly and glory' Gibbon saw a strange mixture of motives. There was a confusion of religious, though superstitious ideals, a desire for personal glory and an outlet for the national passions of warlike peoples. Above all, the Crusades

1. Sheffield (Contents in MW, vol. III) dates it between 1758 and 1763, but Bury (DF, III, 268, n. 8), J.W. Swain (op.cit., pp. 122-3) and P.B. Craddock, all suggest 1771. On this question, see Craddock, op.cit., p. 57.

2. MW, III, 16-17.


4. DF, lviii, VI, 284; lxi, VI, 464.

5. 'Outlines', MW, III, 13.

6. See DF, lviii, VI, pp. 278-284. cf. also p. 329, 'The World was scandalised by the pride, avarice and corruption of these Christian soldiers'.
appeared to him as immoral since they involved the imposition of religion by force, and often, as in the case of Richard, by unworthy agents.¹

Even so noble a character as Sir Phillip Sidney, who was included in Gibbon's original list of attractive prospects, might also have appeared less perfect on closer scrutiny. At least, in a later reference to the use of 'corruption' to achieve a desirable end, Gibbon mentioned the fact that Sidney was 'said to... have received a bribe in the cause of liberty.'² In thus scrutinising subjects for his history, Gibbon subjected popular, but often hypocritical opinions, to rigorous re-examination as he brought national heroes and their exploits before the bar of moral values.

Richard gave way to the Black Prince who also failed to satisfy Gibbon's moral judgement. His Journal does not give any real indication as to why he dropped this famous warrior prince, but there is a comment in the Outlines which throws light on his attitude. Once again he felt a certain hollowness of the fame of this 'hero' and the patriotic perversion of values seemed to the philosophic historian grievously out of perspective. 'The English dwell with rapture on the trophies of Edward III and his gallant son the Black Prince; on the fields of Crecy and Poitiers; and on the Kings of France and Scotland, at the same time prisoners in London. To a thinking mind, Edward's encouragement of the woollen manufacture is of greater value than all these barren laurels.'³ We may surmise, since we have no direct statement on Henry V, the last of these earlier English heroes, that he, too, must have been

1. See also below chap. VII, pp. 366-7.
2. DF, xxi, II, 390, n. 117.
3. MW, III, p. 35.
weighed in the same scale of values and found wanting. To Gibbon, the victories of peace were more worthy of the historian's acclaim than those of war. This standard of values is amply illustrated in The Decline and Fall and is sometimes emphasised by an overt moral judgement. There he wrote of 'ages of prosperity sacrificed to moments of glory', and near the beginning of chapter I he deplored the fact that 'as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors, the thirst of military glory will ever be the vice of the most exalted characters.'¹ He saw with a philosophic eye that the world still tended to extol the deeds of those who beggared their countries in useless and bloody battles, but often forgot the useful if less exciting benefits which flowed from the policies of peace.

Sir Walter Raleigh provided Gibbon with his most promising English subject, one which he researched and pondered for about a year. In this case again, there was a strong appeal to the imagination as well as the assurance of adequate sources. 'I at last fixed upon Sir Walter Raleigh for my hero, and found in his life a subject important, interesting and various, with such a quantity of materials and even found that the subject gained by closer investigation. Yet by the following July he had come to a quite different conclusion: 'I believe I must give it up'.³ Why then did such a likely subject not produce the 'intended historical essay'⁴ which Gibbon had hoped to write?

1. DF, xi, i, 330; i, i, 6, and see below, chap. V.
2. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30.
3. JA, 4, 13 August, 1761, January, 26 July, 1762, pp. 30, 32, 44, 102. The Memoirs version (p. 121) runs, 'I am afraid of being reduced to drop my hero'.
4. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30.
We have already noticed his doubts about being able to add anything new to what had already been written on Raleigh and his times.\(^1\) There was also the fear that recent history inevitably tends to become party history.\(^2\) To discover more than this we must read between the lines of the Journal. We find that Gibbon proceeded by way of Birch's account of Raleigh's life and Hume's history of the period to a close study of Oldys' 'elaborate Life, prefixed to the eleventh edition of Raleigh's History of the World.\(^3\) He found Oldys' work disappointing; 'a very poor performance', he later called it.\(^4\) Even though the author had diligently collected and arranged almost all the available materials on Raleigh, the results was 'an apology, tediously full of insignificant circumstances and wrote in a most heavy affected style'. It was even 'very barren of materials' in certain parts, and these the most characteristic parts of the life, 'so essential to a biographical writer'.\(^5\) It was thus in no sense a philosophic history, merely 'a servile panegyric.'\(^6\) That from the historian's point of view was unphilosophic in itself. But was the subject worthy of such undilated praise? The patriotic fervour of

1. See above, p.119 and note 2. Finding the first volume of Voltaire's Louis XIV much less interesting than the second, Gibbon commented that 'so many writers had exhausted the battles and sieges of Lewis XIV'x reign, that it was impossible to add anything new'. (JA, 28 August, 1762, p. 129).
2. JA, 26 July, 72, p. 103. ('I should hardly choose to write on this part of our history, where every character is a problem, and every reader a friend or an enemy; where a writer is supposed to hang out a badge of party, and is devoted to destruction by the opposite faction'.)
3. Raleigh's History of the World, the 11th ed. To which is prefixed the Life of the Author, by Mr. Oldys. London, 1736. See JA, 4, 13 August, 1761 and Memoirs version of January 1762 (pp. 120-1).
4. Memoirs, p. 121. (JA, 26-7-72 has 'a very indifferent work'.)
5. JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 102.
6. Memoirs, p. 121 (JA, 'it is throughout a panegyric'.)
Englishmen might persuade them to agree, but what of Gibbon's wider public, his European readers who had acclaimed his *Essai*? How would Raleigh be received by them?

These were the questions Gibbon asked himself in trying to reach a decision about this topic. He had to face the fact that while Raleigh's story was certainly interesting, 'his actions are of so subaltern a nature and his writings so confined to the language they were composed in that his fame can hardly ever pass the limits of our island.',\(^1\)

Was Raleigh indeed a 'subject fit for history', as Gibbon intended to write it? With the moral criteria revealed both in the *Essai* and in Gibbon's rejection of his previous topics to guide us, we may better interpret his judgement that Raleigh's 'character is ambiguous', or as he originally put it, 'so doubtfully handed down to us'.\(^2\) As we can see from a comparison of the *Essai*, the 'Hints' and the *Journal*, Gibbon looked for the 'fame' which should be accorded to a philosophic history;\(^3\) but to achieve this, he also needed a subject able to inspire and to support such a history. It became plain to him that his European public would be likely to treat the English adventurer with contempt, and for Gibbon 'indifference' abroad seemed to be 'far more bitter than censure, or reproach' at home.\(^4\) Raleigh clearly would not do. His character was not sufficiently clear, and he was too limited in appeal which depended largely on the patriotic prejudices of his

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3. In the 'Hints' (*MW*, V, 487) he confessed, 'I would despise an author regardless of the benefit of his readers: I would admire him who, solely attentive to this benefit, should be totally indifferent to his own fame. I stand in neither of these predicaments'.
fellow countrymen. Therefore, Gibbon concluded, 'I must look out for some other subject'.

This conclusion, when incorporated in the Memoirs, is there reinterpreted as the need for 'a safer and more extensive theme.' This seems to represent, like a number of rephrased Journal entries, other than mere stylistic improvements, a gloss on the original in which Gibbon attempted to recapture more clearly for the reader, his thoughts at the time. In this case he was bringing out his conviction that whatever subject he finally decided on, it must be safe: it must avoid both inherent dangers to which insular or partisan topics were liable, and also the moral ambiguities which were often concealed behind blind patriotism and false hero worship. In any case, the satisfying topic should be 'extensive', transcending the narrow boundaries of purely national fame to which figures like Raleigh were confined. And with that Gibbon looked beyond the limits of biography.

He turned finally to two subjects which seemed 'fit for history' in fulfilling the necessary requirements. They were normally inspiring and they were 'more extensive' in several ways. No longer biographical, they exemplified such extensive themes as courage and liberty; they were 'European' rather than narrowly English, and they were subjects which have been seen as 'elements in the great problem which exercised the historians of the eighteenth century.' That problem, Roman decline

1. JA, loc.cit.
and the lost millennium which followed, he was not yet ready to tackle. But for the present he found an absorbing subject in the country of his adoption, 'The History of the Liberty of the Swiss, which that brave people recovered from the house of Austria, defended against the Dauphin... and at last sealed with the blood of Charles'. This was the one he would 'prefer to all others'. Here indeed was a 'glorious theme' which should cause 'the meanest writer to catch fire'. But the other, 'The History of the Republic of Florence, under the House of the Medicis', was also a 'splendid subject' on which he thought he would ultimately settle, partly because the sources of the former were inaccessible to him, being 'fast locked up in the obscurity of a barbarous old German language', which he was not prepared to study just for this task.

The Florentine Republic was certainly suggested to Gibbon from his reading of Machiavelli's History, a work he greatly admired and to which he was introduced in his first serious study of history at the age of fourteen.

Both these topics concerned human freedom, a growth in the one case, a decline in the other; and 'both lessons', Gibbon felt, 'are equally instructive'. It is significant that both topics remained with him and still exercised his mind in the year after he had decided on Rome. But it is more significant to our present purpose to note

1. JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 103.
2. Memoirs, p. 141; JA, loc.cit., cf. Memoirs, p. 122: 'From such a theme the dullest stranger would catch fire'.
3. Memoirs, p. 42, where he speaks of swallowing 'many crude lumps' of these modern historians. By the 18th century, Machiavelli's Istorie fiorentine was available in two English translations; Gibbon mentions reading it in Italian during his study of the language in the winter of 1759. (JA, p. 10).
4. Memoirs, p. 122, based on JA, 'Both lessons equally useful'.
the grounds for their choice which were not coldly rational, but emotional and moral. Gibbon thought in terms of 'glory and liberty', being 'influenced with the zeal of patriotism', 'the dullest' catching fire, as well as useful or instructive lessons, 'public spirit', 'great lessons of government', 'examples of virtue'.

It is not surprising then to find that when he took up his Swiss subject five years later and wrote an introduction to the history of that republic, he could, even after his Roman experience, still describe it as a 'glorious theme' which 'satisfied' 'my judgment as well as my enthusiasm'. This is all the more striking in view of his well-known remark concerning his emotional reactions: 'My temper is not very susceptible of enthusiasm, and the enthusiasm which I do not feel I have ever scorned to affect'. And the rare show of enthusiasm to which that remark referred was the climactic and unique experience, his first sight of Rome. Thus both Rome and Swiss liberty stirred Gibbon to an enthusiastic response which is almost without parallel in his career.

The two 'noble' themes that Gibbon finally arrived at in the middle of 1762 both answered to the aspirations of the historian. 'What might not I hope for', he wrote of the former, 'who to some talents perhaps add an affection for the nation which would make me labour the composition con amore'. The other also enjoyed a particular advantage in 'two

2. 'Introduction à l'Histoire générale de la République des Suisses' (MW, III, 239-330).
4. ibid., p. 134.
5. JA, p. 103.
fine morceaux for a Philosophic historian, and which are essential parts of it, the Restoration of Learning in Europe by Lorenzo de Medicis and the character of Savanarola'.¹ No wonder Gibbon's problem in this instance was not the inadequacy of a 'hero', but which of two equally stirring themes he should choose. Both were left suspended at this stage.² Nor could he ultimately choose between them without the opinion of his friend Deyverdun, whose collaboration as translator also finally removed the obstacle of the German sources. Meanwhile, however, with the French war at an end and freed from militia service, Gibbon eagerly seized the opportunity to return to Europe at the beginning of 1763. Paris, with its polished society and its facilities for research, and Lausanne, with its 'tranquil simplicity' and renewed friendships, were merely preliminaries to the keenly anticipated Italian tour.

It is obvious to the reader of the Journals and the Memoirs that Gibbon's preparatory reading for this Italian tour, as well as his travelling library, was not that of a historian of early modern Italy let alone of the Swiss Republic, but of ancient and medieval Rome.³ When he was able to return to Paris in January 1763, he was thinking in terms of some historical subject of commanding interest, neither politically contentious nor partisan, but 'extensive' and having ample

1. JA, p. 104.
2. As Gibbon wrote in this Journal entry: 'This design I believe I shall fix upon; but when, or how shall I execute it? That is a thing I can say little to at present'. (JA, pp. 104-5).
3. See the record in the Lausanne Journal of his detailed study of ancient Rome, especially in Nardini, which Pavillard procured for him from the Geneva library (17 September to 2 October, 1763) and of ancient Italy in Cluvier 'une enterprise considerable', from 13 October to 3 December. (JA, pp. 42-87; 90-163). Other books included a dissertation on the buildings of ancient Rome (ibid., 6 October, p. 82).
and accessible materials. His programme involved visits to the Academy of Medals and to libraries, and in particular a study of Mabillon's great work on diplomatics and Montfaucon's Palaeographia. Neither of these works had a direct bearing on any modern theme; both were tools for an earlier period of History. In addition, his plan of reading included the ancient historians and later works on old Rome, topographical and geographical studies of the empire from which he drew up his own 'Recueil géographique de l'Italie', and finally, 'the science of medals'. In a neat little mahogany box was his 'travelling library', consisting of twenty-four volumes of Brindley's ancient classical editions, amongst which were Sallust, Caesar, Nepos and four volumes of his beloved Tacitus. 'And thus', wrote Gibbon, 'was I armed for my Italian journey'.

As we watch him set out on this long-awaited tour, the earlier attractive topics seem to be forgotten and we may well ask with Trevor-Roper, 'was this...the prospective chronicler of the Medici, or of the liberty of the Swiss, and not rather, even now, even before his Roman experience, the historian of the Roman Empire? Even the historian himself, at least as he arranged his life in retrospect for the Memoirs, seems to leave on the table several significant titles to point the reader to the destined outcome of this memorable journey.

1. The references to these authors in the footnotes of DF testify to Gibbon's continued use of them. He also records how he earlier used a large part of his first allowance in Lausanne to purchase volumes from the Academy of Inscriptions, a school of ancient literature he 'most assiduously frequented'. (Memoirs, p. 97).
There are the Roman Antiquities, the Italia Antiqua, descriptions of Italy by Strabo, Pliny and other ancient writers, the topography of the city and Bergier's *Histoire des grands Chemins de l'Empire Romain.*

And he leaves us in no doubt as to the goal. 'ROME is the great object of our pilgrimage'.

So much is clear, but Trevor-Roper proceeds to ask a second question about this tour: 'What historian could face all at once, so huge a subject? Giannone had contented himself with a geographical fragment of it... Hume had shown what could be done in one brilliant essay...Robertson had swept over the whole period from Antiquity to the Renaissance in two long, masterly sketches...How much simpler it must have seemed to Gibbon to follow the example of these revered masters: to detach another manageable portion than tackle the whole gigantic problem!'

This 'great problem' which 'haunted the new "philosophical historians"', of the eighteenth century was the apparent discontinuity of historical development in view of the long dark gap between the high civilisation of Rome and their own. It was one to which their own age, unlike the previous century, was ready to address itself and of which, according to Trevor-Roper, 'all the subjects which in turn occupied Gibbon's mind can be seen as elements.'

1. See Memoirs, pp. 131-2, and Gibbon's account of his reading over this period in JB; cf. note 3, p. 136 above.
3. op.cit., p. 425. The work of Hume referred to is his essay 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations' (to which Gibbon referred more than once: DF, xxxi, III, 323, n.; and MW, V, 178, 549, for minor comments; and also JB, p. 163, n. 1). Robertson's works are his Charles V and America (both also cited in DF).
5. ibid., p. 426. See also pp. 422-5 for his definition and discussion of the 'problem', as considered by Giannone, Bolingbroke, Montesquieu and Dugald Stewart.
Yet there seems no evidence in Gibbon's writings to suggest a conscious analysis of this 'huge subject' into its constituent elements nor any preoccupation with it at the time of his tour of Italy. His journal of the tour is silent and we must look to the late reconstruction of the Memoirs for the clue connecting his experience of the city with his destined subject. The truth is not so much that Gibbon was unable 'to face all at once so huge a subject', but rather that he only began to be aware of its extent when, eight years after his experience in Rome, he got down to the business of writing his first volume. The 'limits and extent' of the subject were still not clear, as he explored his way 'through the darkness of the middle ages'. 'At the outset all was dark and doubtful: even the title of the work, the true area of the decline and fall of the Empire...'. These had still to be decided and defined. His 'original plan was circumscribed to the decay of the City', which had provided the initial inspiration, 'rather than of the Empire', which was a later outgrowth of this inspiration.

But what of the earlier topics? Were they conceived deliberately or even dimly in the light of this 'great problem' of the eighteenth century? Was Gibbon, in effect, tackling it piecemeal? Such a view tends to undervalue their appeal for the aspiring historian, especially considering the enthusiasm aroused by what struck him as in themselves 'glorious' or 'splendid' themes. And it finds little support in the Englishness and hero-centred nature of the series that preceded them. Nor could Richard, and even his crusade, be seen as major issues in the

1. His last journal ended in December 1764 at Rome with descriptions of ancient objects of art. See JC, pp. 236ff.
2. See Memoirs, pp. 146-7, 155.
3. ibid., p. 136.
great medieval question; nor could Henry V,¹ let alone Raleigh, Montrose or Sidney. Surely Gibbon saw them as historical figures in their own right, or 'heroes' as he called Richard and Raleigh.² However he may have viewed Charles VIII, his Neapolitan expedition of 1498 lies outside the limits of even the later extended scope of *The Decline and Fall*. The Florentine subject, which was to deal with the period between 1420 and 1569, was again largely beyond this scope. The Swiss Liberty, though mainly within it,³ was but remotely connected with the transformation of the Roman world and the medieval problem of discontinuity.

What is certain is that the common factor in these last two subjects is not Roman decline and medieval darkness, but the very characteristic Gibbonian theme of liberty, which gripped him not only in ancient Rome but also in modern England, France or America. "Liberty" had always been one of Gibbon's watchwords', says Swain, 'and he believed that all culture and civilisation itself were dependent upon it'.⁴ It was

1. Trevor-Roper (p. 425) says, 'the English subjects were suggested by Hume'. They are mentioned in the *Journal* for 4 August, 1761 and the first reference to the relevant volume of Hume's *History 'just published' is on 2 November, where it is described as 'ingenious but superficial'. He consulted Hume's earlier volume for background on Raleigh, apparently after he had already settled on this subject (cf. 4 & 13 August, 1761.)

2. It was only when he felt this 'hero' had been fully treated already that he thought of extending his topic to 'the general history of the age, so far as connected with the life of Raleigh'. (*JA*, 26 July, 1762, p. 102).

3. *JA*, p. 103 and *Memoirs*, p. 141 ('I embraced a period of two hundred years from the association of the three peasants of the Alps to the plenitude and prosperity of the Helvetic body in the sixteenth century.')

the only climate in which moral choices could be made.\(^1\) Liberty and
the loss of liberty form one of the dominant themes of The Decline
and Fall.\(^2\) In the case of his last two topics, Gibbon saw them merely
as contrasting illustrations of this one great theme: Switzerland
'emerges into glory and liberty', while Florence suffers 'the loss of
her liberty'.\(^3\)

Even more basic than the questions we might ask about the nature
of the subjects Gibbon was considering at this time, is the question
as to the nature of the history he must write. We have seen some of
the underlying principles as he explored them somewhat tentatively in
the Essai. Does he give us any further 'hints' as he now faces up to
the problem of finding a compelling topic? One comment he made after
reading Voltaire's Louis XIV is revealing. While admitting it was
'told in an easy, clear, and lively style', he noted the absence of
'any thing of the majesty of the great historians',\(^4\) those whom he
himself dared or hoped to follow. It is probably this 'majesty' more
than anything else which has made Gibbon's own History 'a truly classic
work', still holding its place long after its contemporaries have been
forgotten.\(^5\)

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1. Cf. Bury's comment (Memoirs, Intr. xvi), 'Liberty was in fact
his ultimate standard; perhaps there was no deeper feeling in
his breast than jealousy of personal freedom, and independence
which he describes as the first of earthly blessings'.
2. It is a fruitful study to follow related terms like 'liberty',
'freedom', 'independence', 'despotism', 'tyranny' though the whole
of that work. Swain gives some instances on pp. 142-3.
3. 'I have another in view, which is the direct contrast of the former',
he wrote. See JA, p. 104 and Memoirs, p. 122.
4. JA, 28 August, 1762, p. 129.
5. 'Lo, there is just appeared a truly classic work', wrote Horace
Walpole to William Mason, 18 Feb. 1776, Correspondence, ed.
It was also clear that there would be no room for trivialities in the work Gibbon would write. One of the merits he found in Voltaire's Louis XIV was his 'throwing aside all trivial circumstances, and chusing no events, but such as are either useful or entertaining'. In fact, Gibbon had dropped his projected work on the Neapolitan expedition of Charles VIII not only because it was morally unsatisfactory but also because on closer investigation, he concluded that this event was not great in itself. Furthermore, apart from the events themselves, one must avoid superficiality of treatment which he detected even in the work of Hume. In his reading at this time, he was aware of this defect in other eminent writers like Voltaire and Fontenelle, whose Histoire des Oracles, he wrote, 'tho' excellent, is somewhat superficial'. Gibbon's history would certainly be accurate and impartial since two of 'the most important parts' of history he considered to be accuracy and impartiality. But, as one would expect from the Essai and his comments on the Swiss and Florentine subjects, it would also be instructive and useful. This was in fact, fundamental to his view of history. Even Voltaire, though no moralist, had concentrated, as Gibbon said, on what was 'either useful or entertaining'. He welcomed this quality of usefulness in a book of Erasmus, which was 'a perfect contrast to most fashionable French ones, since it is useful without being brilliant'.

1. JA, 28 August, 1762, p. 129.
2. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30; and see above p. 121 of this chapter.
3. JA, 2 November, 1761, p. 42; and see p. 124 of this chapter.
4. 'He follows some compilation, varnishes it over with the magick of his style, and produces a most agreeable, superficial, inaccurate performance'. (28 Aug. 1761, JA, p. 129).
5. JA, 31 May, 1761, p. 79. He wrote of the author of some Dissertations, 'Godeyn is polite and curious, but somewhat pert and superficial'. (ibid., 6 Aug., 1762, p. 108); cf. his criticism of Pouilly, 'esprit brillant et superficiel' (Essai, XXVII).
6. ibid., 26 October, 1762, p. 174.
7. de Burigny's Life of Erasmus (JA, 29 September, 1762, p. 147).
And of another book he enjoyed reading that same year, he wrote, 'Leti is a most agreeable Historian, a little more regard to truth and exactness would have made him an instructive one.' Instruction was to be found in discerning truth, and in those 'useful lessons' to be drawn by perceiving moral causes and effects.

The theory of this he had begun to explore in his Essai. But where, he had suggested in that work, could it find better illustration than in the greatness and the fall of empires. Writing, in his early work on feudal government, of the peoples who overturned the Roman Empire, he noted that, 'De tous les empires, celui des Romains s'est élevé le plus lentement et s'est soutenu le plus longtemps. Voilà à la fois la cause et l'effet'. That of Charlemagne also 'porta dans son sein ces principes de destruction.' Here was the principle of destruction from within rather than from without which Gibbon was later to apply. Even at this time, we may note, he was reading one of his most indispensable sources for The Decline and Fall, Tillemont's History of the Emperors. Moreover, in tracing the decadence of empires, the loss of liberty in republics, and the tyranny of rules, there would be occasion for Gibbon's moral outrage to show itself in the more instructive parts of the story. Righteous indignation,

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2. Essai, chap. LV, p. 69; see also chap. III, p. 114-5 above.
3. 'Du gouvernement féodal, tout en France', MW, III, pp. 183-202. This was written, according to Sheffield, between 1758 and 1763.
4. op.cit., pp. 194, 197. See also pp. 199-200 on causes and effects.
5. JA, 16 October, 1762, p. 163. Cf. Gibbon's oft-quoted remarks about this author in DF: 'The patient and sure-footed mule of the Alps may be trusted in the most slippery paths;' (xxv, III, 50-1, n.26) and his regret in chapter xlvii, 'And here I must take leave forever of that incomparable guide'. (V, 141, n. 81).
though often tempered with irony, would burn through some of the pages of his history when the occasion arose. So after reading the eighteenth book of the Iliad, Gibbon wrote in his Journal that Homer's very excess of rage, 'tho' terrible, pleases us, because it is only directed against the murderer of his friend. And in 'the crimes and follies' of mankind which it fell to the lot of the historian to trace, there would be ample scope for such rage. In another set of 'Hints', written after he had found his great subject, but some time before he began to unfold it, Gibbon asked himself, 'Historians friends to Virtue?' and answered, 'yes - with exceptions.'

To many of Gibbon's contemporaries, the most 'instructive lessons' were to be found in modern history, and they felt it was to this period that 'philosophic historian' should direct his attention. To Voltaire this was the only really verifiable part of history. Only at the end of the fifteenth century, he held, with printing and the revival of the sciences, 'font qu'enfin on a des histoires assez fideles, au lieu des chroniques renfermees dans les cloxtres depuis Gregoire de Tours... Pour penetrer dans le labyrinthe tenebreux du moyen âge, il faut le secours des archives, & on n'en a presque point... Not only was modern history more authentic, but also more relevant in its application

1. JA, 1 July, 1762, p. 89.
2. See below, chapter V, 11.
3. 'Hints', in P.B. Craddock, The English Essays of Edward Gibbon, pp. 88ff. They are dated between 1765 and 1768. The quotation is from No. 1, p. 88.
4. Cf. Gibbon's use of this phrase concerning his last two topics (Memoirs, p. 122) with the various remarks in DF about the 'useful lessons' or 'instructive lessons' of history (e.g. xlii, IV, 387; xlv, IV, 471).
5. See Dorothy Koch, English Theories Concerning the Nature and Uses of History, 1735-1791, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Yale, 1946, chap. I, 'Bolingbroke and the "New History"', in which she examines the antecedents and the significance of the maxim 'History is philosophy teaching by examples'.
to one's own day. 'Enfin la grand utilité de l'histoire moderne, & l'avantage qu'elle a sur l'anciène, est d'apprendre a tous les potentats, que depuis le xv siècle, on s'est toujours réuni contre trop prépondérante...'. Hence Voltaire's own histories were concerned with the modern period. Nor did Bolingbroke see the value of spending much time on history before the end of the fifteenth century, particularly as far as the education of the governing class was concerned. 'Down to this area let us read history; from this area down to our own times, let us study it.' All the knowledge needed for ecclesiastical or civil policy was to be found within this period of history, which also seemed to him 'more entire as well as more authentic' than a good deal of ancient history. Hume, too, who 'wrote his History backwards', starting from the most recent times, set out 'to teach lessons directly relevant to contemporary politics'. While he sought both to entertain and to bring out what he saw as the vices and virtues of the persons in his story, the contemporary motive took precedence. His History of England 'was primarily a tract for the times'; written mainly 'to exorcise irrational hostility between the Whigs and the Tories'.

Even Gibbon himself seemed to favour recency and relevance when he described the first topic he rejected as being 'too remote from us'.

Why then did he not settle on some modern topic?

1. ibid., p. 223, col. 2 (De l'utilite de l'Histoire).
3. ibid., II, 223; cf. also II, 211-2.
4. His first volume on the Stuarts appeared in 1754, his second in 1756, his last 'From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Reign of Henry VII', in 1762.
6. JA, 4 August, 1761, p. 30 and p. 121 of this chapter.
To ask such a question reminds us in the first place that in his reading for pleasure as well as in his systematic programmes of study, Gibbon had always turned very largely to the ancient classics or to books about them. This predilection with the ancient world applied also to his critical writings, most of which were on ancient, a few on medieval and none on modern subjects. It would therefore be more appropriate to ask a rather different question namely: why should he turn away from a field very much his own in order to choose a modern theme, unless it was only there that he could find scope for the investigation of moral causes and effects, the analysis of human nature and those 'useful lessons' which were the concern of the philosophic historian? However, it was mainly to refute such a suggestion that Gibbon had written his Essai. There he aimed to prove 'that all the faculties of the mind may be exercised and displayed by the study of ancient literature', and this was shown to apply to the study and writing of history as much as to other branches of literature. All the examples and arguments were thus drawn from the ancient world.

Nor was Gibbon's use of the materials of ancient history undermined by the scepticism which characterised Voltaire's view of their validity. Gibbon strongly rejected the extreme Pyrrhonism of some of his contemporaries as highly dangerous and went to some lengths in the Essai to vindicate the reliability of Roman history. This history had suffered a great deal,

1. About three-quarters of those written before the conclusion of DF are on ancient subjects. See MW, vols. III-V.
3. See Essai, chaps. XXVII to XXXIV.
he said, from the attacks of writers like M. de Beaufort 'qui savoit
douter et qui savoir décider'. He had revived the controversy associated
with M. de Pouilly, 'esprit brillant et superficiel, qui citoit
plus qu'il ne lisoit' and who cast doubt on the 'historical certainty'
of the first five centuries of Rome: 'Mais son imagination peu faite
pour ces reserches, céda facilement à l'erudition et à la critique de
M. Freret et de l'Abbé Sallier'. There was no need then for this
'Pirrhonisme historique' to which, said Gibbon, his own century had
given birth. In his choice of a subject he was not inhibited by the
feeling Voltaire and Bolingbroke expressed about the lack of authenticity
of earlier history.

The only modern subject on which Gibbon had done any extended
research was Raleigh and his times. In abandoning it he had recorded
his aversion to becoming involved in a period of English history which
tended to be polarised into warring factions. The historian was
'supposed to hoist a badge of party', and his work inevitably made
'every reader a friend or an enemy'. Gibbon could surely not have lost
sight of the fact that Hume, who persistently asserted and was sure
he had achieved impartiality in his History, was attacked by both parties.
He might also have remembered the passage in Hume's Treatise dealing with
our emotional reactions in time of war. We detest our enemies 'under

1. Cf. the remark on Hume's final volume as 'ingenious but superficial'
and other references to Gibbon's criticism of superficiality, on
p. 142 above.
2. Essai, XXVII, p. 40.
3. JA, 26 July, 1762, p. 103.
4. 'I may be liable to the reproach of ignorance, but I am certain of
escaping that of partiality'. See H. Trevor-Roper, 'David Hume as
5. 'While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs Tory'. See E.C. Mossner,
'Was Hume a Tory Historian?', Journal of the History of Ideas, ii,
1941, pp. 225-236 and 'An Apology for David Hume, Historian',
PMLA, lvi, 1941, pp. 657-690.
the character of cruel, perfidious, unjust and violent'. If the enemy
general is successful, he is bloodthirsty and merciless; if we are
successful, our commander 'has all the opposite good qualities;...
every one of his faults we either endeavour to extenuate, or dignify
it with the name of that virtue which approaches it.'

In this light Gibbon's fear of running into a period of party
warfare has a deeper moral significance for the writer of the history
of such times. Impartiality, one of his key tenets, would be as impossible
to achieve as it was for Hume; at least it would not be recognised
as impartiality. Not only that, but party prejudice would surely
blind his readers to the great lessons of human nature, of vice and
virtue, since their passions were already committed to their
particular side. So, to use Gibbon's term in connection with this very
topic, would not his own period of ancient history afford a 'safer'
ground on which to illustrate 'the constant and universal principles
of human nature'? But it was not only 'safer', it was also richer,
for he must surely have felt what he later affirmed in The Decline
and Fall, that 'the annals of the emperors' revealing to us 'the utmost
lines of vice and virtue' 'exhibit a strong and various picture of
human nature, which we should vainly seek among the mixed and doubtful
characters of modern history'.

Thus in avoiding recency, Gibbon was not abandoning relevance or

2. Again Hume's own phrase, but applicable with qualifications to
   Gibbon, who saw these basic motives and reactions of human nature
   continuing beneath the outward appearance of changing manners and
   the 'vicissitude' of events.
3. DF, iii, I, p. 86.
the possibility of current application. Trevor-Roper has pointed out
how great historians, in responding to the demands of their age,
have either been inspired by 'a present crisis' or have 'turned to a
carefully chosen chapter of past history in order to better interpret
their own age.' In the second category are the eighteenth-century
'philosophic historians' including Gibbon, interpreting the new
Enlightenment by a look back over the past centuries, seeing 'the
history of humanity in a long perspective' and asking questions above
all about the declining Roman Empire and the dark and middle ages'.

The 'myth of Rome's fall' had, before Gibbon wrote, and has since
his day, continued to fascinate historians by suggesting parallels
and applications for the diagnosis of the West in modern times.

The Decline and Fall itself contains many historical parallels,
lessons and philosophic analyses. Some of these occur at the end
of the first part of the work in Gibbon's 'General Observations on
the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West' which include some reflections
on the prospects of European civilization in the old world and in
America. 'Like many of his contemporaries', says Swain, 'Gibbon saw
a close parallel between the Roman Empire of antiquity and the British
Empire of his own day, and in his History he ascribed to ancient Rome
not only the glories of the British Empire, but also its weaknesses'.

1. 'The Idea of the Decline and Fall' in Barber et.al., op.cit.,
   pp. 422-3.
2. Spengler and Arnold Toynbee come to mind and more recently, Michael
   Grant's The Fall of the Roman Empire - a Reappraisal. Radnor, USA,
   1976; see in particular his introduction, p. 17. See also R.M.
   The Decline of the Ancient World. London, 1966; Santo Mazzarino,
   La Fine del Mondo Antico. 1959, tr. as The End of the Ancient World.
   London, 1966; and F.W. Walbank, The Awful Revolution. The Decline of
   the Roman Empire in the West. Liverpool, 1969.
4. op.cit., pp. 141-2. See also pp. 130-1 and 138 &c. where Swain
   points out some oblique references to contemporary persons and
   situations.
Gibbon's use of this 'myth of Rome' has been developed more recently by Michel Baridon,¹ who traces the image of Rome in the minds of the Augustans and shows, like Swain, the current political overtones in Gibbon's Roman Empire.

'ROME is the great object of our pilgrimage'; this parting explanation set the tone for the whole Italian tour. In a journey of just over a year, eighteen weeks, or almost exactly a third, was spent in Rome. The lengthy notes in his Journal record the intense interest with which the traveller studied the statues and busts of the emperors in the Florence Galerie.² But the excitement with which he approached 'the eternal city' remained an unforgettable experience even as he penned his Memoirs a quarter of a century later.³ Not enthusiastic by nature, as he knew himself to be, he made no secret on this occasion on his enthusiasm for the climax of his pilgrimage. A sleepless night preceded 'days of intoxication' during which the great figures of ancient Rome seemed to come alive among the ruins of the forum. As he wrote to his father a week before the decisive day: 'I have already found such a fund of entertainment for a mind somewhat prepared for it by an acquaintance with the Romans, that I am really almost in a dream. Whatever ideas books may have given us of the greatness of that people. Their accounts of the most flourishing state of Rome fall infinitely short of the picture of its ruins'.⁴

². JC, 16me, 17me Juillet, 1764, pp. 166-171. He also inspected the imperial medals in the Cabinet des Medailles (see pp. 194-201). See also the imperial inscriptions he copied down (p. 149). From Florence he wrote to his step-mother, 'Dear Madam this tour is one of the very few undertakings that exceed the most sanguine and flattering hopes...' (Letters, 20/6/64, I, 180ff.)
⁴. Letters, No. 61, 9/10/64, I, pp. 183-5.
After several days of excitement, he was ready to 'descend to a cool and minute investigation' of the actual sites which turned into personal experience all his preparation from books. In this climactic experience he was convinced that he had finally found the theme he sought: '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 in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.'

Here is the statement as Sheffield printed it in his edition of the Memoirs. It represents Gibbon's third version and a good deal of attention has been given to it by critics particularly in view of the slight difference in details between the versions. 'To what extent', Bonnard asks, 'is the famous statement fact, to what extent imagination?' since, as he reminds us, 'The "ruins of the Capitol", he had only seen in his imagination, for, in 1764, the Capitol was already what it now is.' Gibbon saw it, no doubt, with the same vision with which, as he had walked the forum in those exciting days, he could say, 'each memorable spot where Romulus stood, or Tully spoke, or Caesar fell was at once present to my eye'. But this same vision of the Capitol, common to both the first and last versions of the famous sentence in the Memoirs was exactly that with which he had also closed his History. After surveying with his reader the ruins of the city as they were in

2. ibid., Editor's Notes, pp. 304-5 where Bonnard discusses the rephrasing of this sentence. See also the versions as printed in John Murray's The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon.
his own day, he soberly recorded as he finished the book: 'It was among the ruins of the capitol that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised nearly twenty years of my life'.

As Gibbon looked back, with his great work behind him, he read a particular order and progression into the life of 'the historian of the Roman Empire'. 'If Gibbon writes history and memoirs from the same desire, we must read the life with as much suspension of judgement about "the truth" as we read The Decline and Fall. Both are necessarily personal readings of the past'. This is important to remember; but in trying to make the delicate division between 'truth' and 'imagination', we must not lose the essential truth of the statement, that something happened in Rome; Gibbon was converted to Roman greatness, as indeed he suggested to his father, and to an awful awareness of its fall. Making due allowance for the reworkings of the celebrated Memoirs statement, and for the author's apparent patterning of his life in retrospect, we must accept the significance of the time and the place in the making of the historian. This emerges from whatever version of the event we take, and the revisions through which it passed, all really elaborations of the basic statement in the History, may be said to confirm its pivotal importance for Gibbon himself.

Something else strikes one too about the famous sentence. It is often felt that Gibbon tried to make it 'as dramatic and significant as he could'. This seems to suggest a striving after dramatic effect.

1. DF, 'Conclusion of the whole work', VII, p. 338.
2. Roger J. Porter, 'Gibbon's Autobiography, Filling up the Silent Vacancy', Eighteenth-Century Studies 8/Nr. 1, Fall, 1974, p. 6. Cf. Swain, op.cit., p. 4: 'he could show how he had arranged his whole life with a view to producing his great History; nothing else, he would show, had really mattered'.
Yet if so, it is rather that of understatement, of quiet restraint. The drama is to be seen in the preceding days and Gibbon's account echoes this. Then follows a 'cool and minute' inspection of the ruins. The celebrated entry occurs in a sort of postscript to the narrative of the tour, a discussion of the value of foreign travel. And in about four pages devoted to the Italian tour, the Roman experience is given only about as many lines. In each of the versions it seems to be deliberately played down in the context of the whole story of the Memoirs. The tone is restrained. It is announced by no trumpets and it is immediately taken up into a further qualification about the actual scope of Gibbon's subject. All this seems reasonable enough when we consider that in the account of his life, this experience did not bear fruit at once; it did not herald the beginning of The Decline and Fall which had some time yet to wait. But I suggest a more significant reason for this obvious restraint. It is that the essential truth of the statement needs no great elaboration or embellishment to make its point. It can be said simply and briefly; it had already been said even more briefly, but conclusively at the end of the History. No overemphasis was needed. That great work was in itself adequate testimony to the experience at Rome. It was not unlike Wren's memorial inscription in St. Paul's: 'If you seek his monument, look around you'.

There is surely no need, then, to doubt the reality of Gibbon's conversion to Rome through his experience of the city. 'It was the view of Italy and Rome which determined the choice of the subject', he wrote. He had needed to see what was still to be seen of ancient

1. 'Si monumentum requiris, circumspice'.
Rome, its venerable ruins. But he also needed to see more, and he did. He saw the ruins of the Capitol and 'the eternal city', not Christian but pagan, with the eyes of moral vision. The two Romes merged and separated in his mind's eye. The Church of the Zoccolanti became the Temple of Jupiter once again. The experience, of course, represented no sudden conversion; it was long prepared for, over almost a lifetime. But it represented a commitment to Rome that was both permanent and complete. Even though he temporarily returned to other themes, he never lost his vision of Rome. In the first summer after his return from Italy, 'the decline and fall of Rome' was 'still contemplated' though 'at an awful distance', but meanwhile he turned to something more moderate and more manageable.

This was a reconsideration of his earlier favourites, the twin topics of liberty in Switzerland and in Florence. After discussion with Deyverdun, the choice fell, not surprisingly, on the former, especially as his companion was now available to translate the German sources which had hitherto been the main obstacle. But the preliminaries involving the collection and translation of sources proved a longer job than had been supposed. Meanwhile Gibbon undertook a short piece of investigation which is highly relevant to our view of the historian seeking to come to grips with his chosen theme. It is significant because it is Roman, but even more so because it reveals the moralist focusing

1. The fact that the scene of Gibbon's musing, St. Maria in Aracoeli, was actually the site of the temple of Juno Moneta, is of little consequence to the fact of the experience. See, however, Bury's note on the site, DF, VII, pp.235-6, n. 47; also Lynn White, Jr. (ed), The Transformation of the Roman World. University of California Press, 1966, p. 291.
on motives and intentions, just as he was to do with his characters in The Decline and Fall. In this 'Digression on the Character of Brutus'\(^1\) we see Gibbon, completely overturning the commonly accepted estimate of the 'hero' and patriot because he saw it to be based on a moral confusion. Not only, says Gibbon, was this man praised by all the great writers of the following age, but even two centuries after the establishment of the empire, 'the character of Brutus was studied as the Perfect Ideal of Roman Virtue'. Furthermore, in modern England, France and Italy 'his name has always been mentioned with Respect by the Adherents of Monarchy; and pronounced with Enthusiasm by the Friends of Freedom'.\(^2\) That is the long-entrenched estimate which continued to be held almost without exception by those of opposite political opinions. It is the also bound up with the theme of liberty for Brutus owes this universal esteem, to his traditional role as the enemy of tyranny and the defender of freedom.

Gibbon found himself having to dissent from 'the Sentence of Ages'. Not only did he see the assassination of Caesar as a 'feeble and unfortunate' act, but he also saw the character of Brutus as tainted by compromise and, most heinous of all, by 'unrelenting avarice'.\(^3\) Hence he sought 'to enquire, in what consisted THE DIVINE VIRTUE OF BRUTUS?' He was concerned, as ever, with the motive, the intention behind the act. The ancients, he said, generally applauded tyrannicide, just as the nations of modern Europe generally condemned it. But all that could be said in favour of the 'GODLIKE STROKE' of Brutus was 'that by acting up to the established standard of Roman virtue, he is

\(^1\) MW, IV, p. 95ff. Sheffield marked it 'date uncertain'; Craddock in The English Essays of Edward Gibbon dates it 1765-6.
\(^2\) MW, IV, p. 95.
\(^3\) ibid., pp. 96, 103.
entitled to our indulgence, and in some measure to our esteem. Yet in these nice cases, where the esteem is bestowed on the INTENTION, rather than on the ACTION, we ought to be well assured that the intention was pure from any interested or passionate motive; that it was not the hasty suggestion of resentment or vanity, but the calm result of consistent and well grounded virtue, impatient of slavery and tender of the rights of mankind.  

Here is Gibbon's criterion and it is interesting to find him laying down this standard of virtue as he approached The Decline and Fall, with its numerous character sketches of notable persons, where the motive, the intention, became the determining factor. In this early work, however, he stressed that the praises of the ancient writers, even the nobility of Brutus's own letters, had to be weighed against the private and public conduct of the 'hero'. We may easily be predisposed towards him by this literary evidence, 'but it is the uniform tenor of his life, private as well as public, which must in a great degree acquit or condemn the conspirator.'

In Gibbon's examination, Brutus stood condemned on several counts: his 'unrelenting avarice', which perhaps even surpassed that of the notorious Verres; his equivocation, his obsequiousness, his compromise of his republican principles, and his perjury. To Gibbon, the ardent champion of freedom, a key question in the cross-examination of contemporary witnesses was this: 'Could Brutus accept, could he solicit

1. MW, IV, p. 100.
2. ibid., pp. 100-1.
3. ibid., p. 103.
4. ibid., p. 106.
5. When governor of Cisalpine Gaul; see p. 107.
the honours of the state from a master who had abolished the forms of
elections?\(^1\) There was an obvious inconsistency in an avowed republican,
patriot and defender of liberty accepting such honours from the destroyer
of liberty and the republic. 'True patriotism would have instructed him
not to cancel but to refuse obligations of such a nature from the declared
enemy of Cato and the liberty of Rome'.\(^2\) Might there not be here an
implied lesson for some British patriots in Gibbon's day? In ancient
Rome, and perhaps in eighteenth-century England, one might expect the
ordinary people to confuse the name of democracy or liberty with its
actual abuse in practice; but no philosopher should be guilty of such a
confusion.\(^3\)

The 'philosophic historian' and lover of liberty, after his
re-examination of the facts concerning the character and motives of
the Roman 'patriot', concluded with a declaration of the moralist's
reverence for truth. 'Such are the reflections, which an accurate
examination of the character of Brutus has suggested to an enemy of
tyrranny, under every shape: who will neither be awed by the frown
of power, nor silenced by the hoarse voice of popular applause. The
monarch and the patriot are alike amenable to the severe but candid
inquisition of truth.'\(^4\) The core of the 'Dissertation on Brutus' and
its relevance to the making of the moralist historian is that it is
an examination not of legal issues but of ideals and of consistency
to avowed ideals, and that it becomes the occasion for the enunciation
of general moral principles.

\(^1\) ibid., p. 108.
\(^2\) ibid., p. 109.
\(^3\) ibid., p. 111 ('but to a philosopher of an enlarged mind it was
surely of little moment under what appellation public liberty
was oppressed.\)')
\(^4\) ibid., loc.cit.. On these sentiments see also Gibbon's Lettre sur
le gouvernement de Berne, discussed below.
However, before Rome finally claimed Gibbon's undivided attention, there was an abortive return to the Swiss theme. He had once before touched on the question of liberty in Switzerland, very likely several months prior to setting out on his tour of Italy. His *Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne*, written under the guise of a Swedish traveller to his Swiss friend, had drawn attention to what young Gibbon saw as defects of the administration and the oppression of the Vaud. After appearing in an edition of the *Miscellaneous Works* published at Bale in 1796-7, it was used by J.B. Say in 1802 and by the historians of the Vaud revolution. Its immediate interest to our discussion lies in the fact that it concerns the liberty and equality of the citizen, that it uses an example from ancient Rome with a contemporary application, and proclaims some general principles. The historical reference concerns freedom, Roman tyranny and the case of Brutus: 'Arretez, Monsieur; Je vous ai parlé en homme libre et vous me repondez dans langage de la Servitude. Arretez. En convenant pour un moment de votre bonheur, de qui le tenez vous? de la Constitution? Vous n'osez pas le dire. C'est donc du prince? Les Romains en devoient un plus grand à Titus. Ils etoient cependant de vils esclaves. Brutus vous auroit appris que dans un Etat Despotique le prince peut quelquefois vouloir, le bien: Mais


2. Sheffield, taking it to be in Gibbon's early handwriting, placed it 'probably about the time of his first leaving Lausanne', i.e. 1758 (MW, II, 1). Junod showed better reasons for placing it in his second Lausanne period, connecting it with an entry in JB (1r Nov., 1763, pp. 126ff.). See Junod's Preface, pp. 118-120.

3. See notes 1 and 2 above.

4. 'Ces indications sommaires montrent l'emploi abondant qui a été fait de la lettre de Gibbon par les historiens de la Révolution vaudoise,' Junod, Préface, p. 115.
Junod was struck irresistibly by a connection between some of the sentiments in the *Lettre* and the reflections in Gibbon's *Journal* at this time. His reading of Cluvier and Vertot led him to write of the domination of the peoples of Italy by the Romans: 'Ils ne voyoient point des Gouverneurs dont l'insolence egaloit l'avarice, toutes leurs affaires evoquees à la Capitale. et un mur d'airain qui separoit à jamais le Citoyen et le sujet. On refusoit la bourgeoisie Romaine aux Cites, mais des qu'un particulier faisoit par­oir une ambition justifiee par les talens. La Republique connoissoit trop bien ses interets pour ne pas la lui accorder.' Then the current application: 'J'ecris dans le pays de Vaud. Ses habitans doivent etre contens de leur etat. Qu'on le compare cependant à celui de ces peuples d'Italie,' and Gibbon went on to mention exclusion from advantages and even rights. Thus both the *Journal* and the *Lettre* draw an analogy between the condition of the Vaudois and conditions in Roman times.

In the *Lettre*, amongst particular references to the situation of the Vaudois, Gibbon enunciated certain general principles, sometimes rather oratorically. 'Que vois manque til la liberté: et prive de l'objet est le bien commun de la Société, vous n'etes point libres.' These and similar Gibbonian principles lend the document an importance for our study of the development of the moralist and the historian, amongst

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2. See his preface to the *Lettre*, pp. 118-9.
them being the emphasis on toleration in the face of minute theological differences which was to become so marked a feature of The Decline and Fall: 'En soutenant les droits de l'humanité, je n'outre point les maximes de la Tolerance'.

Eventually the groundwork for the history of Swiss liberty was prepared and about four years after his return from Italy, Gibbon began to write. The subject still appealed to him, even after his conversion to Rome, as being a 'glorious theme' in its own right and fully satisfying to the historian. Having written the introduction he submitted it to the judgement of Hume, whose only adverse comment was that it should have been written in English instead of French. This criticism, Trevor-Roper suggests, may have convinced Gibbon to write his Decline and Fall in English. This may be so, but our more immediate question is, what persuaded him to relinquish this last survivor of his earlier topics, one which still satisfied both his 'judgement' and his 'enthusiasm'? On Gibbon's own admission this was the only literary preoccupation standing between him and his destined work. Its abandonment could not have been due to Hume's comments which were complimentary and encouraging. His objection to the language chosen was merely that it was the wrong choice for a work he thought 'written with spirit and judgment'. 'And', he added, 'I exhort you very earnestly to continue it'. Surely no criticism would have been more valued than Hume's.

1. Lettre, pp. 124, 125, 134.
2. Hume's letter of 24 October, 1767 is printed in Sheffield's edition as a footnote to the Memoirs (MW, I, pp. 204-5).
5. 'As soon as I was released from the fruitless task of the Swiss revolutions, I gradually advanced from the wish to the hope, from the hope to the design, from the design to the execution, of my historical work'. ('D' version, MW, I, p.213).
What then removed this last obstacle to the writing of The Decline and Fall? In the absence of a journal, which came to an end at Rome, we have only the comments of the Memoirs to guide us. The suggestion there is very much like that in the case of Raleigh, that the work would be uncertain of gaining fame abroad. Perhaps once again it was not 'safe' or 'extensive' enough. At any rate Gibbon tried a specimen of the Swiss history on 'a literary society of foreigners in London', but by means of anonymity, he made sure that his audience could freely speak their mind. Their judgement was unfavourable and, he said, his own 'cooler thought' later ratified 'their condemnation', though 'the momentary sensation was painful'.

Was Gibbon in agreement with his foreign audience about the style and treatment only, or had he begun to have reservations about the subject itself? There is no reason to doubt that he had considered the theme as glorious and the country worthy of a historian. It was his adopted country, the one which had in a sense made him, and to which some years later he eagerly returned to live. Rousseau and other notable men had made it famous and its stirring struggle for independence appealed to Gibbon as a suitable moral issue. However, his closer study of the sources, with Deyverdun's help, may have revealed a good deal of petty and unpleasant in-fighting among the cantons which would appear as a blemish on the pure fight for liberty. It may have made it difficult for him to present Switzerland unambiguously as the citadel of freedom and moral virtue. Nor would the picture of a narrow, closed Calvinistic culture in many areas have suited his ideal. This would have disgusted him and offended his ideas of freedom and toleration.

2. ibid., pp. 141-2.
The most Gibbon admitted in his Memoirs was that his work must inevitably have been 'slight and superficial' since he was after all a foreigner who had spent but a few years in Switzerland, and was 'uninformed by the scholars and statesmen and remote from the libraries and archives of the Swiss Republics'. No doubt with this last thought in mind, he also referred to the two years preparatory labour as having yielded only 'slender materials' from which he would have to write. Having abandoned this 'essay', he was able to express his dissatisfaction with both its scholarship and its style, and as he turned to The Decline and Fall, the whole task which had entered its third year seemed to have been 'fruitless'. Yet one has to ask, if Gibbon was swayed by the negative reaction of a group of foreign gentlemen in preference to the positive encouragement of the great 'philosophic historian' himself, how much persuasion did he really need to exchange the lesser subject for the greater? The tone of the retrospective comments in the Memoirs also supports this view: 'released from the fruitless task' and 'I cannot regret the loss of a slight and superficial Essay'.

2. 'My ancient habits, and the presence of Deyverdun encouraged me to write in French, for the Continent of Europe: but I was conscious myself, that my style, above prose and below poetry, degenerated into a verbose and turgid declamation. Perhaps I may impute the failure to the injudicious choice of a foreign language'. (ibid., p. 142.)
3. ibid., p. 146.
4. ibid., pp. 146, 142.
With this last diversion out of the way, Gibbon was able to come to grips with his great work and began to prepare his materials. Out of this preparation it seems came the 'Outlines of the History of the World',¹ in some ways a sort of rough draft for the time schedule of The Decline and Fall as originally announced in Gibbon's first preface.² Though the 'Outlines' are a mere chronological sketch, neatly divided into centuries and countries and even lacking much balance or perspective, the work is punctuated with moral judgements and assessments which are essentially those of The Decline and Fall. The references to Richard and the crusades have already been cited,³ but one could take a number of such comments which any reader of Gibbon might identify as coming from The Decline and Fall. Thus he wrote that, 'The Christians of the western and eastern empires had scarcely any common resemblance, except that of religious superstition'. Or again, 'Edgar is celebrated by the monks for his profuse devotion to their order; and by rational men, for the attention he gave to the natural strength of his kingdom'. In like vein is the typically Gibbonian comment on 'Henry II, surnamed the Saint because he chose to be the last of his family'.⁴ There are also remarks on 'the active genius of the Arabs' and the awakening

2. DF, I, xxxix-xl, where the three periods of the history must correspond to the building of 'three stories' which he mentioned in his letter to Sheffield (No. 642, 20/1/87; III, 59). The note in DF, chap. xxx (III, 283, n. 88) is thought to refer to all or part of the 'Outlines': 'As early as 1771, I find the same idea expressed in a rough draft of the present History'. See also Swain, op.cit., pp. 122-3 and Craddock, op.cit., p. 57.
3. See chap. IV, p. 128, nn, 1,2 above.
genius of Europe being tarnished by ignorance and error\(^1\) where again the tone is unmistakably that of The Decline and Fall. A short section, under the fourteenth century devoted to the achievement of Swiss liberty, begins with the words: 'The Swiss owe their reputation to their freedom, and their freedom to their valour'.\(^2\) Apart from parallel sections between the two works\(^3\) there are sometimes strong verbal similarities. Thus the judgement on Innocent III in the 'Outlines', 'By establishing the doctrine of Transubstantiation and the tribunal of the Inquisition he obtained the two most memorable victories over the common sense and common rights of mankind', became: 'Innocent may boast of the two most signal triumphs over sense and humanity, the establishment of transubstantiation and the origin of the inquisition'.\(^4\) Even through the sketchy and abrupt treatment of the 'Outlines', we see the essential viewpoint, the 'temperate irony' and the language of moral comment ready for the later work. Patricia Craddock notes that while there are obvious differences between the 'Outlines' and the last two volumes of The Decline and Fall in 'Gibbon's knowledge and priorities', yet 'his values and value judgements...show relatively little change in the same period (1771-88)'.\(^5\)

The Decline and Fall was now coming into sharper focus for Gibbon. The implementation of his plan, however, was made possible not only by his release from competing literary interests, but also by his achievement at last of the necessary independence.\(^6\) This had not

1. ibid., III, pp. 6, 19.
2. ibid., III, p. 32.
3. A list of parallel passages is given in Craddock, op.cit., Editor's Notes, pp. 565-6.
5. op.cit., p. 564.
6. 'the first of earthly blessings', as he called it. See Memoirs, pp. 150-5.
come about till he had attended to the most pressing demands of his late father's mortgaged estate, provided for his step-mother and settled himself in his own house in London. There, surrounded by his library and 'absolute master' of his time and activities, he could tackle the history which not long before he had merely 'contemplated at an awful distance'. The subject itself was 'awful' in more ways than one: it was awe inspiring, 'perhaps the most awful scene in the history of mankind'; it was also formidable, even forbidding, because so huge and overwhelming. How huge Gibbon had not yet discovered and had hardly dared to investigate till he had enjoyed his new independence. This gave him at last the freedom to explore the site and make more detailed drawings. One preliminary sketch is probably seen in the 'Outlines'. Then, as he sought to define the title and the time span of the work, he found 'the decline and fall of the city' growing into that of the empire, eventually both the east and the west. With the help of Muratori's work and other great scholarly volumes from his shelves, he 'explored' his way 'through the darkness of the middle ages', till at last he 'almost grasped the ruins of Rome in the fourteenth century'. He was back at those ruins which had originally determined his commitment to the decline and fall of Rome. At the end of his great work he was able to reaffirm the rightness of his subject, when after a final survey of the noble ruins, he wrote that the attention of every modern 'pilgrim' to the imperial city, indeed of every reader, 'will be excited by an history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire; the greatest, and perhaps the most awful scene, in the history of mankind'.

1. Memoirs, p. 146.
2. 'At the outset all was dark and doubtful: even the title of the work, the true area of the decline and fall of the Empire...' (Memoirs, p. 155); and still in 1781-2, 'So flexible is the title of my history that the final area might be fixed at my own choice...' and he goes on to consider whether the eastern empire should be included. (ibid, p. 164).