A COLOSSEUM BUILT BY A DWARF

An Introduction to *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

and

its author Edward Gibbon

By Reinier H. Hesselink

Edward Gibbon

I. The Colosseum

"Posterity admires, and will long admire the awful remains of the amphitheatre of Titus, which so well deserves the epithet of Colossal. It was a building of an elliptic figure, five hundred and sixty-four feet in length and four hundred and sixty-seven in breadth founded on fourscore arches, and rising, with four successive orders or architecture to the height of one hundred and forty feet. The outside of the edifice was encrusted with marble, and decorated with statues. The slopes of the vast concave, which formed the inside, were filled and surrounded with sixty or eighty rows or seats, of marble likewise, covered with cushions, and capable of receiving with ease above fourscore thousand spectators. Sixty-four vomitories (for by that name the doors were very aptly distinguished) poured forth the immense multitude; and the entrances, and passages, and staircases were contrived with such exquisite skill that each person, whether of the senatorial, the equestrian, or the plebeian order, arrived at his destined place without, trouble or confusion. Nothing was omitted which, in any respect, could be subservient to the convenience and pleasure of the spectator. They were protected from the sun and rain by an ample canopy occasionally drawn over their heads. The air was continually refreshed by the playing of fountains, and profusely impregnated by the grateful scent of aromatics. In the centre of the edifice, the arena, or stage, was strewed with the finest sand, and successively assumed the most different forms. At one moment it seemed to rise out of the earth, like the garden of the Hesperides, and was afterwards broken into the rocks and caverns of Thrace. The subterraneous pipes conveyed an inexhaustible supply of

water; and what just before appeared a level plain, might suddenly be converted into a wide lake, covered with armed vessels, and replenished with the monsters of the deep. In the decoration of these scenes the Roman emperors displayed their wealth and liberality; and we read on various occasions that the whole furniture of the amphitheatre consisted either of silver, or of gold, or of amber." [1]

Extracting building blocks, like the foregoing long paragraph, happily does not destroy Gibbon's edifice like the depredations of the Colosseum itself by the Ursini and the Colonna in the fourteenth century.[2] On the contrary, the happy quality of ideas is their endless capacity for duplication. I am, therefore, free to roam through Gibbon's structure and take from it what I need to illustrate my points. And the paragraph quoted will serve as our exemplum: it may stand as a descriptive, however unintended by Gibbon himself,[3] of this most impressive monument of history writing of the eighteenth century: the 2500 pages of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon.

If the Colosseum is vast, so is *The Decline and Fall*. If it is of intricate construction, so is Gibbon's work.

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[1] *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* edited by J.B. New York: The Heritage Press, 1946. Vol. I, p. 270-1. Hereafter cited as *D+F*, I, 270-1.

[2] Cf. *D+F*, III, p. 2438, n. 24.

[3] Even if Gibbon never wrote of the Colosseum with his own work in mind, he did think of himself, perhaps inevitably, in terms of a builder: "Three storyes already were 'exposed to the public eye', and there would be three more 'before we reach the roofs and battlements,'" Quoted from: Peter Quennell, *Four Portraits,* p. 126.

If it was built of the best material available, so did the historian spare no efforts in bringing together all the facts known on his subject. The Colosseum is imposing, pleasing, elegant, solid, and inside there have been innumerable spectacles for countless numbers of people. *The Decline and Fall* has done no less: in its arena tragedy and farce follow each other in a dazzling sequence held together by the mortar of Gibbon’s classical style.

Let’s plunge in and start by analyzing the passage quoted. We notice immediately that it is built out of facts. Facts strung together: in just twelve sentences (345 words in all), Gibbon gives us sixteen objective facts about the Colosseum: its form, length, breadth, height, number of arches on the ground floor, number of floors, number of rows, number of seats, materials and decorations used, comfort and safety systems, plumbing, and the degree of versatility of the arena. Admittedly, the sentences are long: the average number of words of these twelve sentences is twenty-nine. But then, the number of commas is large as well: thirty-seven, or on the average 3 per sentence, help the reader find the intended rhythm.

Among the twenty-one adjectives in this passage there are only three which fall into the category of subjective opinions: awful (said of the noun ‘remains’), exquisite

(said of ‘skill’), and grateful (said of ‘scent’). There is one simile (‘like the garden of the Hesperides’) and one joke (the mention of the term *vomitories*, used for door openings). In more ways than one, we can see the stylist at work here: carefully stringing facts together, avoiding subjective opinions, but depending on the accumulative effect of his word-structure. Extra long sentences are followed by a few shorter ones, and the row of facts is now and then enlivened by a joke or a comparison.

The passing of time has made the resemblance between Gibbon’s work and the Colosseum still more striking. The Roman monument dates from the first century A.D., when Rome was at the height of its power, and the Decline and Fall was produced at the time when the European mind had, for the first time emancipated itself from Rome’s legacy, from both Christian dogma and Renaissance thinking, producing equally powerful secular thinking. If modern scholarship of the ancient world has advanced since Gibbon’s time and exposed the gaps and shortcomings of his knowledge, the Colosseum as well shows gaping holes and crumbling walls. Both monuments, however, still continue to excite our imagination.

II. The Dwarf

Edward Gibbon was born in Putney, a village on the side of the Thames. He was a tiny baby and a sickly child. Even so, he was the only one out of seven to survive, probably because he was the first and was lucky enough to have a surrogate mother, a spinster, the sister of his real mother. The latter was the fashionable but frail daughter of a London merchant who was not really interested in her children. She dies after giving birth to the seventh child when Edward was only ten years old.[4] Gibbon's father, was a country gentleman and a Member of Parliament of some means which he never did learn to manage properly. Although the family was never in want, in later life Gibbon had to sacrifice his own interests several times to take care of the estates of his father.

Gibbon's early schooling was sketchy at best. Because of his weak constitution he spent most of his time at home without going to school. He became a voracious reader, supervised by a Protestant tutor of stern convictions. He converted to Catholicism when he was sixteen and away from home during his first year at Oxford. This caused such a scandal in the heartland of the Anglican Church that Gibbon's father decided to send him off to Lausanne in Switzerland where another Protestant tutor, the Rev.

[4] Cf. Joyce (1953), p. 3.

Pavilliard, was found for him. In his house, Gibbon spent a crucial five years until he was twenty-one. Eighteen months after his arrival in Switzerland, he was convinced that his conversion had been a mistake and converted back to Protestantism.

From the Rev. Pavilliard, Gibbon received his classical education. He read Latin, some Greek, logic, metaphysics, jurisprudence, French literature and some mathematics.[5] Upon his return to England he served in the Hampshire militia for two years and was, to his consternation, mobilized and forced to move around the country, drill, and sleep in tents. In later life he would look back upon this period with more patience, pointing out the advantage for a Roman historian to have had a firsthand experience of military drills.

From 1763 to 1765, Gibbon was back on the Continent, this time as a published author. His *Essay on the Study of Literature* had been published in French in 1761, and it gave him a limited access to the Parisian *salons* frequented by the major figures of the French Enlightenment. He visited Lausanne again, and then went on to Rome where, finally he got the idea of writing *The Decline and Fall*. As he wrote in his *Autobiography*:

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[5] Cf. Gossman (1981), p. XV.

My temper is not very susceptible of enthusiasm and the enthusiasm which I do not feel I have ever scorned to affect. But at the distance of twenty-five years I can neither forget nor express the express the strong emotions which agitated my mind as I first approached the Eternal City. After a sleepless night I trod, with a lofty step, the ruins of the Forum; each memorable spot where Romulus stood, or Tully spoke, or Caesar fell, was at once present in my eye, and several days of intoxication were lost or enjoyed before I could descend to a cool and minute investigation.[6]

And again:

It was at Rome, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first entered my mind.[7]

However, it was not until the death of his father in 1770 that Gibbon started to write the book itself. The first volume was published in 1776 and five more were to follow until, in 1788, Gibbon had reached the year 1453 when Constantinople fell and the last trace disappeared of what once was the mightiest empire Europe has known.

The book was an instant success, as if somehow people realized that it was long overdue. The intelligentsia of the eighteenth century was far better acquainted with classical culture than we are today, and therefore more

[6] Cf. Quoted in Gay (1974), p. 37.
[7] Quoted in Black (1965), p. 155.

aware that the history of Rome had always been written from its beginnings until its apex, but never from its apex until its very end. Gibbon, therefore, provided a counterpart to Livy and Tacitus, without the biases of the Roman patriots, nostalgic of the Republic for the Republic, but with the benefit of distance in time and a thorough knowledge of the information accumulated since the Renaissance.

Gibbon, a five-foot tall, fat dwarf who had not been taken seriously by many people until that time, basked in fame. Even royalty had to pretend to be interested. When Gibbon presented the second installment of *The Decline and Fall* to the Duke of Gloucester, his Royal Highness received the author with much good nature and affability, saying to him as he laid the quarto on the table: "*Another damn'd thick square book! Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh? Mr Gibbon?*"[8]

Gibbon lived only six more years after having finished his masterpiece. He grew fatter and fatter: he joked about it himself: "Why is a fat man like a Cornish Borough? Because he *never sees his member*.[9] Also, he had been suffering since his militia days of a swelling in the

[8] Quoted form Quennell (1965), p. 122.
[9] Quoted in Carnochan (1987), p. 17.

groin. On 11 November 1793, Gibbon wrote to his friend, Lord Cheffield:

"I must at length undraw the veil before my state of health... Have you never observed through my inexpressibles a large prominency circa genitalia. It was a swelled testicle which as it was not at all painful, and very little troublesome, I had strangely neglected for many years."[10]

Thirty-two years, to be precise. When he finally decided to see a surgeon, late in 1793, the swelling was punctured. This caused an infection from which Gibbon died on January 1794.

I have given these intimate details on Gibbon's life, because they have a direct bearing on his work. His boy- and early manhood show a preoccupation with religion and a defiance of ecclesiastical authority, which would later result in an outright rejection of both Catholicism and Protestantism. The deadly irony of the famous chapters on Christianity in *The Decline and Fall* serves both purposes: to reject and to defy. Listen carefully to the following quotation:

The important truth of the immortality of the soul was inculcated with more diligence as well as success in India, in Assyria, in Egypt, and in Gaul; and, since we cannot attribute such a difference to the superior knowledge of

[10] Quoted from De Beer (1968), p. 118, who gives the best medical history of Gibbon's testicles (pp. 118-121, 129-131)

the barbarians, we must ascribe it to the influence of an established priesthood, which employed the motives of virtue as the instrument of ambition.[11]

After lulling the careless reader into unconscious agreement with the unctious phrase 'the important truth of the immortality of the soul' Gibbon goes on to state that this so called 'truth' was more wide-spread among barbarians than among the ancient civilized world. And analyzing the reasons why, he then insidiously suggests that the concept is inextricably connected with the existence of a priesthood, at which moment even the most credulous reader must feel uncomfortable enough to look back or the whole phrase until coming back to the words 'important truth' again. Another example,

"The writings of Cicero represent, in the most lively colours, the ignorance, the errors, and the uncertainty of the ancient philosophers, with regard to the immortality of the soul. When they are desirous of arming their disciples against the fear of death, they inculcate, as an obvious though melancholy position, that the fatal stroke of our dissolution releases us from the calamities of life, and those can no longer suffer who no longer exist. Yet there were a few sages of Greece and Rome who had conceived a more exalted, and, in some respects, a juster idea of human nature; though it must be confessed that, in the sublime inquiry, their reason had been often guided by their

[11] *D + F*, p. 362.

imagination, and that their imagination had been prompted by their vanity."[12]

All through this passage, Gibbon keeps on trying to appear to say the opposite of what he is saying, that is: the concept of the immortality of the soul is vanity. First, he professes that Cicero was in error and that his position is melancholy. Then he mentions 'a few *sages*', a word with definite positive connotations (he probably means Plotinus and other neo-platonists.), who had conceived a 'more *exalted* idea' which was, and this is a clue to what Gibbon really means, 'only in some respects juster.' Third, he goes on to call the philosophizing on the immortality of the soul 'a *sublime* inquiry' and, again only after having thrown so much sand into the eyes of the reader will Gibbon come out with what he really means: 'vanity.' It should come as no surprise that Gibbon has confused and exasperated countless readers, and there exists a whole library of books on Gibbon by people who want to contradict, argue or prove Gibbon wrong on religious matters. The most infuriating thing, however, must have been Gibbon's superior knowledge of theology, and the history of the ideas which generated Christianity.

[12] *D + F*, p. 360.

Obviously, Gibbon's attitude towards women was influenced by his early childhood intimacy with a spinster, his physical shape and the condition of his scrotum. As Peter Quennell observes in his portrait of Gibbon: *"Feminine virtue and religious faith were subjects on which Gibbon could seldom resist a jeer and from irony he sometimes descended to the type of innuendo favoured by men of letters anxious to remind us that they are also men of the world. Gibbon's speculative salacity has a strongly bookish timbre"*[13] The often quoted rebuke of Gibbson by Porson says if even more succinctly: *"Nor does his humanity ever slumber unless when women are ravished or the Christians persecuted."*[14] Although there was one woman who was attracted to him when he was a younger man, for his later years we have the testimony of Lady Holland who wrote in her diary: " *(...) he was a monster, and so filthy withal that one could not endure being close to him. He was buttoned up in the morning, and never opened till he was undressed at night; thus every besoin of nature was performed in his clothes."*[15]

III. Gibbon and His Time

[13] Quennell, op. cit. p. 116.
[14] For example, ibidem, p. 117.
[15] Quoted in De Beer (1968), p. 120.

This is the moment to place Gibbon historiographically. For this we have to remind ourselves that his lack of formal schooling in England made him stand apart as an autodidact. When he did receive formal training it was in French, in Lausanne. It is almost as if Gibbon unconsciously rebelled through frequent illness against the training that would have made him like his father, but was willing to accept a French substitute. His own reading, then, tended to be at random, whereas his philosophical stance was right with the philosophers of the French Enlightenment.

This autodidactic approach to history, his careful, conscientious and wide reading in classical studies put him, however, on the other side of the historiographical fence; that is: in the camp of the erudites or the 'ancients' attacked by the French philosophers. This controversy had been raging since the late seventeenth century: was the classical period of Greece and Rome the ultimate development of the human mind, which could at best only be repeated in modern times? Or was there progress in history, with each period contributing to the ever-increasing knowledge of mankind. The latter opinion was that of the French optimists, or 'modernes', who despised

the detailed knowledge of antiquity pursued by the 'anciens'.[16]

Gibbon, then, stood in between. He was an erudite, and never failed to acknowledge his debts to the ancients. He could not accept the contempt of his intellectual allies, the philosophes, for those who had accumulated the knowledge which he systematized in his *Decline and Fall*. On the other hand, he could not accept the piety of his professional allies, the erudites either.[17]

Philosophically, he was a pure Enlightenment *philosophe* with a faith in human reason, a vague deism, a hatred of superstition, intolerance and cruelty.[18] He believed with his contemporaries in the idea of progress, and was complacent when observing his own society just before his death:

"We contemplate the gradual progress of society from the lowest ebb of primitive barbarism, to the full tide of modern civilization. We contrast the naked Briton who might have mistaken the sphere of Archimedes for a rational creature, and the contemporary of Newton, in whose school Archimedes himself would have been a humble disciple... Without indulging the fond prejudices of vanity, we may assume a conspicuous place among the inhabitants of the earth. The English will be ranked among the few nations

[16] For the controversy, see Bury (1932), ch. 4.
[17] See Gay (1974), p. 35.
[18] Momigliano (1966), p. 48.

who have cultivated with equal success the arts of war, of learning, and of commerce: and Britain is perhaps the only powerful and wealthy state which has ever possessed the inestimable secret of uniting the benefits of order with the blessings of freedom."[19]

This sounds very much like an upper-class bore, who has had the luck of having been born into money and refuses to see that there is freedom only for the rich.

For Gibbon, the great accomplishment of his age was the recovery of that free spirit of inquiry which had characterized the ancient world. To be a *philosophe* had at least as much emotional content for Gibbon as intellectual. That is: the word described a state of mind, a way of life, and a set of individual and social values."[20] It stood for intellectual skepticism, and social grace, as exemplified in the world of the *salons* of Paris. Intellectual freedom is, indeed, a precious commodity the breeding of which not every time and place will tolerate. Europe, Gibbon was keenly aware, had inherited this spirit from antiquity. The Church had done its utmost to kill it off, but it had not succeeded, as witnessed in his own times.

Of all historians, Gibbon felt most closely related to Tactitus of whom he says he was "*the first of the historians who applied the science of philosophy to the*

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[19] Quoted in Graubard (1977), p. 135.
[20] Quoted from Jordan (1971), p. 76.

study of facts."[21] He found in Tacitus that same pessimism about human nature, the same coldness of approach to the description of character he himself possessed. As Peter Grey comments: "*It is idle to speculate which of the two, the model or the imitator, was the colder... If Tacitus appears like a glacier concealing a volcano, Gibbon is the glacier concealing an iceberg."*[22] With Tacitus Gibbon shared some very basic attitudes towards history. He writes for example:

"*Antoninus diffused order and tranquillity over the greatest part of the earth. His reign is marked by the rare advantage of furnishing very few materials for history; which is, indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.*

Gibbon does not often give us a glimpse of what his own opinions on history are, but here we have two very important clues. First: his bias that Europe is the center of the world expressed in his idea that the Roman Empire represents 'the greatest part of the earth'. The idea haunts us again and again whenever Gibbon writes about 'the barbarians', or those people who live outside of the sphere of influence of the Roman empire, such as the Germanic or Scythian tribes:

[21] *D + F*, p. 167.
[22] Gay (1974), p. 25

" ... the operation of instinct", Gibbon wrote "is more sure and simple than that of reason: it much easier to ascertain the appetites of a quadruped than the speculations of a philosopher; and the savage tribes of mankind, as they approach nearer to the condition of animals, preserve a stronger resemblance to themselves and to each other. The uniform stability of their manners is the natural consequence of the imperfection of their faculties.[23]

Gibbon does not credit 'barbarians' with a culture or religion of their own. He rather lumps them all together as 'close to the condition of animals.'

Second, according to Gibbon, there is no history if there is nothing awful to report: if there are no emperors being killed, no wars tearing the empire apart, no revolutions to be analysed, 'no materials for history are furnished'. It is, of course, only in our time that we have come to realize that history can and should be more than the record of upheavals. There is no reason to fault Gibbon for this, nor for his Europe-centrism. He had read widely on Islam, Persia, China and other areas outside of Europe, and he appreciated, as far as he was able, their civilizations.

That then is Gibbon's major idea? What caused the decline and fall of Rome? Gibbon himself is guilty of

[23] *D + F*, p. 792C3,

starting the reductionist view of his work with his epigram *"I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion."* In reality the book is far more subtle. Crucial to Gibbon was, for example, the Roman loss of 'virtue', and in this he follows in the steps of Bruni and Montesquieux.[24] But his real contribution to historiography probably is his introduction of the argument of Christianity as one of the causes of the decline of the Roman empire. Gibbon was the first to write ecclesiastical history from a secular point of view. Before him, from Eusebius to Bossuet, the history of Christianity had been the exclusive domain of the partisans of the Church or its offshoots. Gibbon, with his immense erudition, offered the public facts on the subject which had never been presented in such a detached manner before.

This is, however, no reason to keep on reading Gibbon. What makes this hisorian immortal is his style. *The Decline and Fall* is a veritable goldmine for quotations. I have quoted as much as I could, and I will also end with one of Gibbon's most famous quotations on religion and the conditions prevailing in the Roman Empire in its regard. In terseness this quote is not inferior to Tacitus, in

[24] Cf. Breisach (1983), p. 217.

profundity it is equal to anything Plato noted down from the mouth of Socrates, and the irony of it is supremely Gibbon himself:

"The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.[25]

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[25] D + F, p. 22.

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