

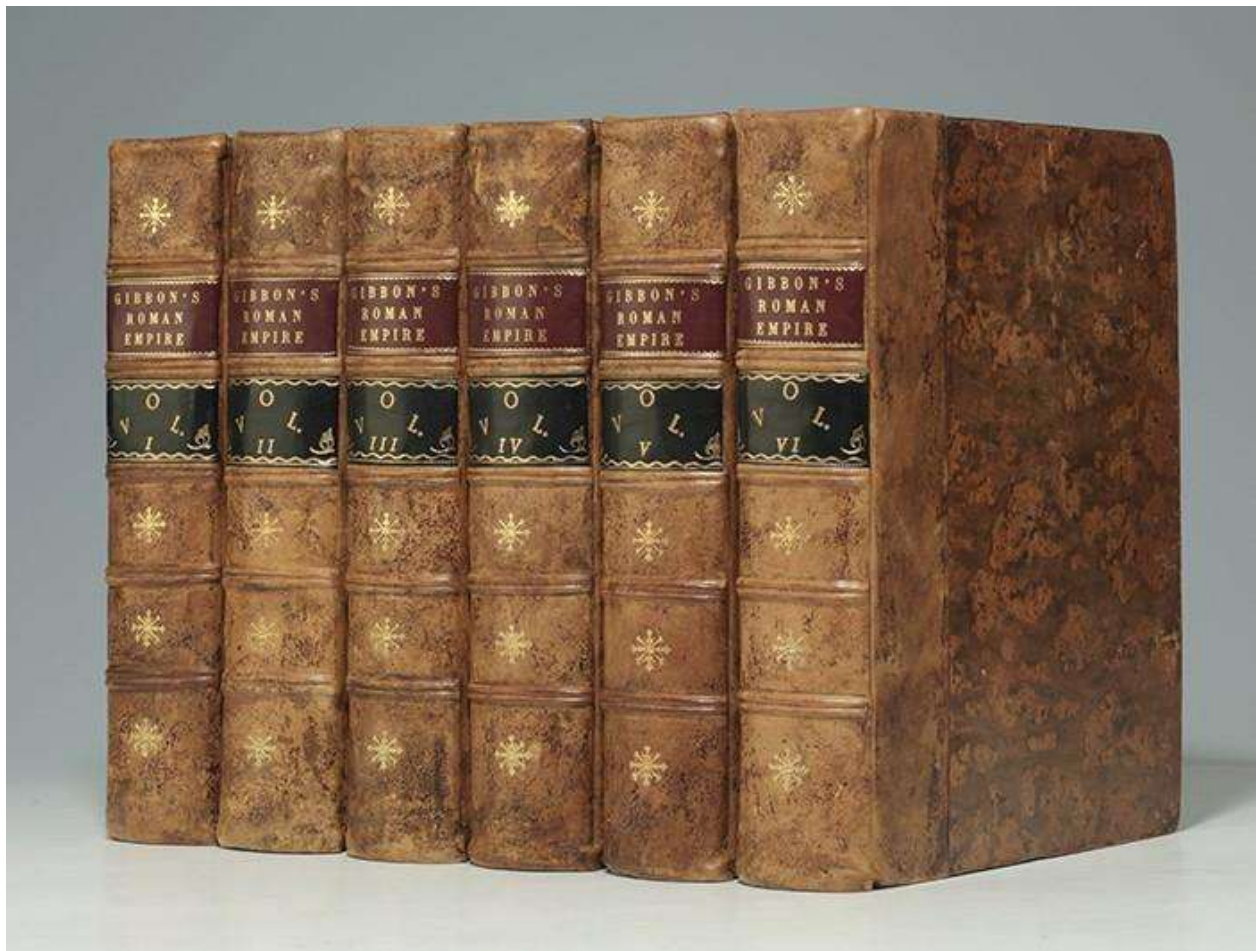
"The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" (in six volumes published 1776-78) by Edward Gibbon: A Canonical Book

(Volume I, a third edition, Volumes II-VI, are first editions) Curated by Stephen A Batman

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Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 1777-1788





"THE GREATEST HISTORICAL WORK EVER WRITTEN": GIBBON'S LANDMARK *DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*

Mixed first and third edition set (Volume I is third edition, issued one year after the first, Volumes II-VI are first editions) of one of the greatest classics of Western thought, with engraved frontispiece portrait of Gibbon and three engraved maps by Kitchin, two of them folding. The third edition of Volume I was extensively revised by Gibbon and also the first edition to include Gibbon's extensive notes as footnotes through the text rather than endnotes.

"This masterpiece of historical penetration and literary style has remained one of the ageless historical works... Gibbon brought a width of vision and a critical mastery of the available sources which have not been equaled to this day; and the result was clothed in inimitable prose" (PMM 222). "For 22 years Gibbon was a prodigy of steady and arduous application. His investigations extended over almost the whole range of intellectual activity for nearly 1500 years. And so thorough were his methods that the laborious investigations of German scholarship, the keen criticisms of theological zeal, and the steady research of (two) centuries have brought to light very few important errors in the results of his labors. But it is not merely the learning of his work, learned as it is, that gives it character as a history. It is also that ingenious skill by which the vast erudition, the boundless range, the infinite variety, and the gorgeous magnificence of the details are all wrought together in a symmetrical whole... *It is still entitled to be esteemed as the greatest historical work ever written*" (Adams, *Manual of Historical Literature*, 146-7).

All 1000 copies of the first edition of Volume I were sold within two weeks of publication in January 1776. Volume I here is the third edition, published one year after the first in a printing of 1000 copies, with notes altered per Gibbon's decision "to take Hume's advice to print the notes at the bottom of the pages" in this and subsequent volumes. The third edition was extensively revised by Gibbon: "improving the turn of the sentence or securing greater accuracy of expression" (Norton, 43). Volumes II-VI are first editions. One of Gibbon's most important presentation copies of his masterwork, to his benefactor Lord Sheffield, is recorded by Norton as "A set made up of Vol. I, Third Edition, volumes 2 through 6 first editions." This mixed edition constitutes the textual standard, reprinted for more than 200 years, without significant emendation. With maps of the "Eastern Part of the Roman Empire" and "Parts of Europe and Asia Adjacent to Constantinople" in Volume II; map of the "Western Part of the Roman Empire" in Volume III. Frontispiece engraved portrait of Gibbon in Volume I; Volumes II-VI with half titles. Norton 22, 28, 29. Rothschild 942, 945. Grolier 100. Engraved armorial bookplates.

GIBBON, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. London: Printed for W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1777-1788. Six volumes. Quarto, contemporary full tree calf rebaked, raised bands, red and black Morocco spine labels. Each volume housed in a custom clamshell box.

Text generally clean, large folding maps with a few minor paper repairs to versos along folds, less foxing than typically seen. Some corners gently bumped. A very desirable set-in contemporary tree calf covers.

Introduction

Edward Gibbon's monumental work "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" stands as one of the most influential historical treatises ever written. Published in six volumes between 1776 and 1788, this magnum opus chronicles the gradual disintegration of the Roman Empire from the reign of Marcus Aurelius in 180 AD to the fall of Constantinople in 1453[1]. Gibbon's work emerged during the Age of Enlightenment, a period characterized by rationalism, scientific inquiry, and skepticism towards traditional authority[2].

The cultural climate of 18th-century Britain provided fertile ground for Gibbon's intellectual pursuits. The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and empirical evidence aligned perfectly with Gibbon's methodical approach to historical analysis. Politically, Britain was experiencing a period of relative stability and prosperity, allowing for the flourishing of arts and sciences. Economically, the country was on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution, which would soon transform society[3].

Gibbon's motivations for writing this comprehensive history were multifaceted. As an Enlightenment thinker, he sought to apply rational analysis to historical events, moving beyond mere chronology to explore the underlying causes of Rome's decline. Moreover, Gibbon aimed to draw parallels between ancient Rome and contemporary Britain, using the past as a mirror to reflect on the present and future of his own society[1][2].

The Author

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) was an English historian and member of Parliament whose life and work epitomized the intellectual spirit of the Enlightenment. Born into a prosperous family in Putney, South London, Gibbon's early years were marked by ill health and irregular education. His academic journey took him from Westminster School to Magdalen College, Oxford, where his brief conversion to Roman Catholicism led to his expulsion[4].

Sent by his father to Lausanne, Switzerland, Gibbon studied under a Calvinist pastor, eventually reconverting to Protestantism. This period in Switzerland proved formative, sharpening his intellect and exposing him to continental thought. It was also in Lausanne that Gibbon fell in love with Suzanne Curchod, though their relationship was ended by his father's intervention[4].

Gibbon's military service in the Hampshire militia from 1759 to 1762 provided him with insights into military organization and strategy, knowledge that would later inform his historical writings. His first visit to Rome in 1764 inspired him to write the history of the city, a project that would eventually evolve into his magnum opus[4].

As a historian, Gibbon was known for his meticulous research, elegant prose, and skeptical approach to religious matters. His work on "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" consumed much of his adult life, spanning from 1772 to 1789. Despite the controversial nature of some of his views, particularly regarding Christianity, Gibbon's work was a commercial and critical success, cementing his place as one of the most important historians of his era[1][4].

Why this is a Canonical Book

"The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" is undeniably a canonical work that has profoundly influenced Western historiography and political thought. Its inclusion in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture is justified on several grounds.

Firstly, Gibbon's work provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors leading to the decline of a great empire, offering valuable lessons for modern nations, including the United States. His exploration of the corrosive effects of corruption, military overextension, and the erosion of civic virtue resonates with contemporary debates about American governance and foreign policy[8].

Secondly, Gibbon's emphasis on the importance of civic virtue and active citizenship in maintaining a healthy state aligns closely with foundational American values. His portrayal of the decline of Roman civic engagement as a key factor in the empire's fall serves as a cautionary tale for modern democracies, including the United States[10].

Thirdly, Gibbon's critical examination of the role of religion in state affairs, particularly his controversial views on Christianity's impact on the Roman Empire, has sparked ongoing debates about the relationship between church and state. This discussion remains highly relevant in the American context, where the separation of church and state is a fundamental principle[3][8].

Fourthly, Gibbon's work exemplifies the Enlightenment values of reason, empiricism, and skepticism towards authority, which heavily influenced America's founding fathers and the principles enshrined in the U.S. Constitution[2].

Lastly, "The Decline and Fall" is a masterpiece of historical writing, setting new standards for scholarship and prose style. Its influence on subsequent historians and its enduring relevance to contemporary political and cultural discussions make it an essential part of the Western canon and a valuable resource for understanding the foundations of American thought and governance[1][6].

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "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."[7]

This quote reflects Gibbon's insight into the pragmatic approach of Roman governance towards religion. It remains relevant today in discussions about religious pluralism, secularism, and the role of religion in public life. In the American context, it speaks to the ongoing debates about the separation of church and state and the challenges of maintaining religious freedom in a diverse society.

2. "The winds and waves are always on the side of the ablest navigators." [7]

This metaphorical statement encapsulates Gibbon's view on the role of skill and competence in shaping historical outcomes. It resonates with the American ethos of self-reliance and meritocracy, suggesting that success often comes to those who are best prepared and most adaptable. In our current times, this quote can be applied to discussions about leadership, innovation, and resilience in the face of global challenges.

3. "Revenge is profitable, gratitude is expensive." [7]

This cynical observation on human nature highlights the often self-interested motivations behind political and social actions. It remains pertinent in analyzing international relations, political maneuvering, and social dynamics. In the contemporary American context, it can prompt reflection on the balance between self-interest and moral considerations in public policy and personal conduct.

4. "The five marks of the Roman decaying culture: Concern with displaying affluence instead of building wealth; Obsession with sex and perversions of sex; Art becomes freakish and sensationalistic instead of creative and original; Widening disparity between very rich and very poor; Increased demand to live off the state." [7]

Although this quote is often misattributed to Gibbon, it encapsulates themes he explored and remains strikingly relevant to contemporary American society. It prompts critical examination of current cultural trends, economic disparities, and the role of government, resonating with ongoing debates about consumerism, wealth inequality, and social welfare.

5. "As long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than their benefactors, the thirst of military glory will ever be the vice of the most exalted characters." [7]

This quote critiques the glorification of military conquest over peaceful achievements. It remains relevant in discussions about war, peace, and the allocation of national resources. In the American context, it can inform debates about foreign policy, military spending, and the celebration of different forms of national achievement.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Decline of Civic Virtue

Gibbon posits that the erosion of civic virtue was a key factor in Rome's decline. He argues that as Romans became less engaged in public affairs and more focused on personal luxury and comfort, the foundations of the empire weakened. This idea resonates with contemporary concerns about civic engagement and the health of democratic institutions[10].

2. The Role of Christianity in Rome's Decline

One of Gibbon's most controversial arguments is that the rise of Christianity contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. He suggests that Christian values of pacifism and otherworldliness undermined the martial spirit and civic engagement that had made Rome strong. While this view is contested by modern historians, it sparked important debates about the role of religion in society and governance[3][8].

3. The Impact of Barbarian Invasions

Gibbon emphasizes the role of external pressures, particularly barbarian invasions, in the fall of Rome. He describes how waves of Germanic tribes, Huns, and others gradually eroded Roman power and eventually overwhelmed the empire. This analysis of external threats and their impact on state stability remains relevant in discussions of national security and international relations[8].

4. The Dangers of Imperial Overextension

Throughout his work, Gibbon explores how the vast size of the Roman Empire contributed to its downfall. He argues that the costs of maintaining such a large territory, both in terms of military expenditure and administrative complexity, ultimately proved unsustainable. This idea continues to inform debates about the limits of power projection and the challenges of managing large, diverse political entities[6][8].

5. The Cyclical Nature of History

While not explicitly stated, Gibbon's work implies a cyclical view of history, where civilizations rise and fall in predictable patterns. This concept has influenced subsequent historical thinking and continues to shape how we understand the trajectory of nations and empires. It prompts reflection on the potential future of current world powers, including the United States[12].

Three Major Controversies

1. Critique of Christianity

Gibbon's portrayal of Christianity as a factor in Rome's decline sparked significant controversy. His skeptical treatment of early Christian history and suggestion that Christian values undermined Roman civic virtues were seen as attacks on the faith. This led to accusations of anti-Christian bias and even attempts to ban the book in some countries. The controversy highlights the tension between Enlightenment skepticism and religious orthodoxy, a debate that continues in various forms today[3][8].

2. Orientalist Perspective

Gibbon's treatment of Eastern cultures, particularly his portrayal of Byzantine and Islamic civilizations, has been criticized for its Eurocentric and Orientalist biases. His dismissive attitude towards the Eastern Roman Empire (which he termed the "Greek Empire") and his characterization of Islamic societies reflect the prejudices of his time. This aspect of Gibbon's work has been subject to increasing scrutiny in light of postcolonial critiques of Western historiography[9].

3. Historical Accuracy and Interpretation

While Gibbon's work was groundbreaking in its use of primary sources and critical analysis, subsequent scholarship has challenged many of his factual claims and interpretations. For instance, his emphasis on the role of Christianity in Rome's fall is no longer widely accepted by historians. Similarly, his portrayal of the "Dark Ages" as a period of unmitigated decline has been significantly revised. These controversies highlight the evolving nature of historical understanding and the importance of critically examining even canonical texts[9][11].

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" for several compelling reasons. Firstly, it provides a profound exploration of the factors that can lead to the decline of a great power, offering valuable lessons for maintaining the health and stability of our own democratic institutions. By examining the erosion of civic virtue in ancient Rome, readers can reflect on the importance of active citizenship and engagement in public affairs in preserving a vibrant democracy[10].

Secondly, Gibbon's work is a masterpiece of Enlightenment thought, embodying the principles of reason, empiricism, and skepticism that were so influential in shaping American political philosophy. Engaging with this text allows readers to better understand the intellectual foundations of American governance and the ongoing relevance of Enlightenment ideals[2][12].

Thirdly, the controversies surrounding Gibbon's work, particularly his treatment of religion and his Eurocentric biases, provide an opportunity for critical reflection on our own cultural assumptions and the evolving nature of historical understanding. This can foster a more nuanced

and self-aware approach to contemporary debates about religion, culture, and national identity[3][9].

Fourthly, Gibbon's analysis of the challenges faced by a vast, diverse empire offers insights into the complexities of managing a large, multicultural nation like the United States. His exploration of themes such as imperial overextension, the integration of diverse populations, and the balance between central authority and local autonomy remains highly relevant to contemporary American politics[6][8].

Finally, beyond its historical and political insights, "The Decline and Fall" is simply a magnificent work of literature. Gibbon's prose style, with its elegance, irony, and wit, sets a high standard for clear and engaging writing on complex subjects. Reading this work can enhance one's appreciation for the power of well-crafted language in conveying important ideas[1][6].

In conclusion, while "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" is undoubtedly a product of its time, its enduring relevance, profound insights, and masterful execution make it an essential read for any civic-minded American seeking to deepen their understanding of history, governance, and the ongoing challenges of maintaining a thriving republic.

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