

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY.
MEMOIRS OF EDWARD
GIBBON, PP. 1-229**

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Autobiography. Memoirs of Edward Gibbon, pp. 1-229 by Edward Gibbon

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

MEMOIRS

OF

EDWARD GIBBON, Esq.

WITH AN ESSAY

By WILLIAM D. HOWELLS.

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EDWARD GIBBON.

THE Muse of History is a worldly personage, who frequently reserves her favors for devotees in easy circumstances. The pushing aspirants who seize the prizes of poetry, fiction, music, the drama, and the other arts, in which genius is required, are apt to be snubbed by this more exclusive lady, whose cult demands long preparation, costly outlays, and ample leisure. She shows to gentlemen of leisure and elegant culture a polite art, one of the very politest, in which industry and perseverance are enough for success and fame, and too often she seems to exact nothing more. A man may not say that he will be a great poet or a great novelist; but with education, money, and time, one may resolve without unexampled presumption to be a great historian. To be sure, this results in many cases in making great historians what they are: greatest when unread, and the most perishable of the immortals. They have so seldom, indeed, been true literary artists, that one has a certain hesitation in pronouncing any historian a man of genius, and it is with a lasting surprise that one recognizes in the greatest of historians one of the

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greatest of geniuses, a writer who possessed in prose, above any other Englishman of his time, the shaping hand; and who moulded the vast masses of his subject into forms of magnificent beauty, giving to their colossal pomp a finish for which there is no word but exquisite.

Yet I think one disposed to be the most sparing of the phrase is quite safe in calling the historian of the "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" a man of genius; not for what he has done for history, but what he has done for literature, in showing that no theme is so huge but that art may proportion it and adorn it till it charms; the work which lastingly charms being always and alone the proof of genius. When one turns to his mighty achievement from other histories, one feels that it is really as incomparable for its noble manner as for the grandeur of the story it narrates. That story assumes at his touch the majestic forms, the lofty movement, of an epic; its advance is rhythmical; in the strong pulse of its antitheses is the fire and life of a poetic sense; its music, rich and full, has a martial vigor, its colors are the blazons of shields and banners. One knows very well that this style would be ridiculous applied to a minor theme; the fact is felt throughout Gibbon's Memoirs, where he apparently cannot unbend from the high historic attitude; though even there, when the thought is eloquent, the language stirs the reader's blood by its matchless fitness. One is aware, too, that the polysyllabic port of the Johnsonian diction has been the mock of vengeful generations, escaping from its crushing weight; yet after the thinness and pallor of much conscious simplicity of later date, its Latin affluence has a deep satisfaction; and though none could ever dream of writing such a

style again, yet its use by Gibbon was part of the inspiration with which he wrought his whole work, and gave its magnitude that brilliant texture and thorough solidity which are even more wonderful than its magnitude.

The history of the Decline and Fall remains unapproached for qualities of great artistry, but not unapproachable. It needs merely an equal genius in future historians, to make every passage of the human epic as nobly beautiful. Its author was indefinitely more than a gentleman of fortune, though he was also this, and frankly glories in the fact in that Autobiography,² whose involuntary pomps are now so quaint, (for he promises that "the style shall be simple and familiar,") and he enters with relish upon a brief account of his ancestors whose "chief honor" was Baron Say and Seale, Lord High Treasurer of Henry the Sixth. This nobleman was beheaded by the Kentish insurgents, and his blood seems to have set forever the Tory tint in the politics of the Gibbons. One amusing forefather of the historian, who visited Virginia, had such a passion for heraldry that it caused him to see in the tokens with which the naked bodies of the savages were painted, a proof that "heraldry was grafted *naturally*

² The story of Gibbon's life as he himself tells it was first given to the world by his friend, Lord Sheffield, who included it among the author's Miscellaneous Works in an edition published after his death. He had left six sketches of several periods of his life; he was apparently quite satisfied with none of them; they varied in form, and were written without regard to order of time. Lord Sheffield put them together, scrupulously respecting the text, and where they were too meagre, he supplied material from the author's journals, and himself appended the notes, signed with an S, in this edition. He continued Gibbon's life from the point at which the Memoir leaves it, up to the time of his death, and he published with it a large number of his letters, running in date from 1756 to 1793; he preferred thus to let the author, as far as possible, tell his own story.

into the sense of the human race"; succeeding Gibbons were Royalists and Jacobites; and the historian himself, in whom the name was extinguished, honored its traditions in his abhorrence of the American Rebels and the French Revolutionists.

Gibbon's childhood was sickly, and it was not till his sixteenth year that his health became firm enough to permit him a regular course of study. In the mean time he had lost his mother, the effect of whose early death upon his father he describes in such affecting language, and he remained in the care of a maiden aunt. He had always been more in her care than in that of his mother, and now she made her helpless charge very much her companion and friend, directing his English studies and watching over his delicate health with all a mother's devotion. His schooling had been intermittent and desultory, and he had but a little Latin and no Greek at the age when "Nature displayed in his favor her mysterious energies," and his disorders "wonderfully vanished." He was then taken from a careless and idle tutor by his father, and suddenly entered at Oxford, of which ancient university the reader will find an amusingly contemptuous account in his Autobiography. Though no scholar, he had always been an omnivorous reader. He arrived at Oxford, as he says, "with a stock of erudition that might have puzzled a doctor, and a degree of ignorance of which a school-boy would have been ashamed," and he quitted Magdalen College after fourteen months, "the most idle and unprofitable of his whole life,"—spent under professors who did not lecture and tutors who did not teach, but drowsed away a learned leisure in monkish sloth and Jacobitish disloyalty. "Tory politics, personal anecdotes, and private scandal" were

the talk with which the fellows of Magdalen College astonished the ingenuous young gentleman-commoner. It was not unnatural that in his uncontrolled and apparently undirected endeavor he should resolve to write a book, which happened to be "The Age of Sesostris," still unfinished if ever begun; nor was it quite strange that such a youth should turn from the bigoted indifference of his *alma mater*, in spiritual affairs, to the great mother-church. At any rate, Gibbon became at seventeen an ardent Catholic, through pure force of his own reasoning and reading; a conversion which necessarily resulted in his leaving Oxford at once, and in his being presently sent to Lausanne, in Switzerland, where he was placed by his incensed father in the family of the Calvinist pastor, Pavilliard. His new faith did not long withstand the wise and careful approaches of this excellent man, who found his charge exceedingly well-read in the controversial literature of the subject, and who chose silently to let him convict himself of one illogical position after another, rather than openly and constantly to combat him. Upon new premises, Gibbon reasoned himself out of Romanism as he had reasoned himself into it. These changes from faith to faith may have had something to do with unsettling all belief in his mind; but it is not a point upon which he himself touches, and he seems to have re-embraced in all sincerity the Protestant religion. The letters which the Pasteur Pavilliard wrote from time to time concerning the progress of his conversion to Gibbon's father are of curious interest, and paint in suggestive touches not only the mental character of the studious, conscientious, dutiful lad, but that of his firm and gentle guardian. They are glimpses that show them both in a very pleasing light, and one would fain know more