

GIBBON

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Gibbon by James Cotter Morison

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JAMES COTTER MORISON

GIBBON

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English Men of Letters

EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY

Several ed.

GIBBON

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BY

JAMES COTTER MORISON, M.A.

LINCOLN COLLEGE, OXFORD

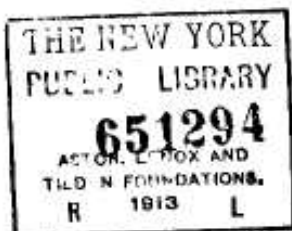


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GIBBON

CHAPTER I.

GIBBON'S EARLY LIFE UP TO THE TIME OF HIS LEAVING OXFORD.

EDWARD GIBBON¹ was born at Putney, near London, on 27th April in the year 1737. After the reformation of the calendar his birthday became the 8th of May. He was the eldest of a family of seven children; but his five brothers and only sister all died in early infancy, and he could remember in after life his sister alone, whom he also regretted.

He is at some pains in his Memoirs to show the length and quality of his pedigree, which he traces back to the times of the Second and Third Edwards. Noting the fact, we pass on to a nearer ancestor, his grand-

¹ Gibbon's Memoirs and Letters are of such easy access that I have not deemed it necessary to encumber these pages with references to them. Any one who wishes to control my statements will have no difficulty in doing so with the Miscellaneous Works, edited by Lord Sheffield, in his hand. Whenever I advance anything that seems to require corroboration, I have been careful to give my authority.

father, who seems to have been a person of considerable energy of character and business talent. He made a large fortune, which he lost in the South-Sea Scheme, and then made another before his death. He was one of the Commissioners of Customs, and sat at the Board with the poet Prior; Bolingbroke was heard to declare that no man knew better than Mr. Edward Gibbon the commerce and finances of England. His son, the historian's father, was a person of very inferior stamp. He was educated at Westminster and Cambridge, travelled on the Continent, sat in Parliament, lived beyond his means as a country gentleman, and here his achievements came to an end. He seems to have been a kindly but a weak and impulsive man, who however had the merit of obtaining and deserving his son's affection by genial sympathy and kindly treatment.

Gibbon's childhood was passed in chronic illness, debility, and disease. All attempts to give him a regular education were frustrated by his precarious health. The longest period he ever passed at school were two years at Westminster, but he was constantly moved from one school to another. This even his delicacy can hardly explain, and it must have been fatal to all sustained study. Two facts he mentions of his school life, which paint the manners of the age. In the year 1746 such was the strength of party spirit that he, a child of nine years of age, "was reviled and buffeted for the sins of his Tory ancestors." Secondly, the worthy pedagogues of that day found no readier way of leading the most studious of boys to a love of science than corporal punishment. "At the expense of many tears and some blood I purchased the knowledge of the Latin syntax." Whether all love of study would