

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol. 1-3: Volumes 1, 2, 3

Edward Gibbon

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Easily the most celebrated historical work in English, Gibbon's account of the Roman empire was in its time a landmark in classical and historical scholarship and remains a remarkable fresh and powerful contribution to the interpretation of Roman history more than two hundred years after its first appearance. Its fame, however, rests more on the exceptional clarity, scope and force of its argument, and the brilliance of its style, which is still a delight to read. Furthermore, both argument and style embody the Enlightenment values of rationality, lucidity and order to which Gibbon so passionately subscribed and to which his HISTORY is such a magnificent monument.

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol. 1-3: Volumes 1, 2, 3 Details


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From Reader Review The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol. 1-3: Volumes 1, 2, 3 for online ebook

Bob Simon says

Momsen was a better historian, but Gibbon a better writer. Forget about historical accuracy and just enjoy the writing. I purchased the three volume Heritage Press edition, with Piranesi illustrations, when I was a young paratrooper. I carried at least one of the volumes in my field pack...a labor of intense love, as they are not light. The middle volume has dried blood on it from when I was injured and wouldn't part with it. I read and re-read...and then re-re-read. Open it to any volume.. to any page and begin. Never, in my mind, have I ever seen such balance of sentences and thought..such delight in words. When I returned to college, I did a Gibbon speciality in 18th Century English lit. Read his autobiography countless times as well. To this day, decades later, I still pull any of the three volumes from my shelf and lose time and place in the joy of reading him. I cannot recommend it too highly.

A delight for anyone. The good stuff just gets better with time

I first read it in 1961, and many times since. The last was December of 2011

Brian says

The long history of a dissolving empire. Gibbon frequently alludes to one or another event as pivotal to the "decline" and/or "fall" of the empire, but he doesn't really make any conclusive statements for "the" cause of the decline of the roman empire. It turns out that history is complex and there is really not one true cause, but many related incidences that complicate a short thesis statement.

I enjoy David Timson's reading, though it does get monotonous at times with the prolific footnotes.

Bradley says

The most astounding work of history ever written. The irony is great, the footnotes are hilarious. He never gets old. His greatest detractors are usually those who never could stomach 2,400 pages or more nor the healthy dose of footnotes. Those who have made the journey realize subtle differences creeping into their existence -- they begin slipping words like 'indolent' and 'flagitious' into memos and conversations or they construct sentences with a newfound reliance on the semicolon. I can picture the little man now, rapping his snuffbox and discoursing on Julian or the folly of Honorius. Only, don't buy the fancy edition pictured here as it is entirely bereft of footnotes. I have an older edition edited by J.B. Bury that includes them all. Gibbon without footnotes is not Gibbon at all.

Darwin8u says

1680+ pages and I am now officially 1/2 done. Love Gibbon's sense of humor, his methodology, his hard

bigotry towards the Huns, his soft bigotry towards the Christians, and his ability to find interesting nouns to link with rapine: "idleness, poverty, and rapine"; "rapine and oppression"; "violence and rapine"; "rapine and cruelty"; "rapine and torture"; "rapine and corruption"; "rapine and disregard"; "War, rapine, and freewill offerings" AND that is all just volume one. An important and interesting work, that moves with a quicker pace than its size or age would suggest. Bring on Volumes 4 - 6 and the decline of the HRE!

sologdin says

I guess this is the standard popular accounting. not sure if it's correct in either its factual allegations or its conceptual conclusions. but the prose is great and it's a lot of fun arguing back at him.

as to facts & conclusions, i prefer to counter with GEM de. Ste. Croix's Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World.

Justin says

I'm only on the second book of this series, but I think I've read enough to mention a point of caution to prospective buyers. Like all classics, "The Decline and Fall" is available in an untold number of editions and I would simply advise against buying the boxed set from Everyman's Library.

I'm going to confess that I bought this particular edition because it looked academic and gave me a warm smug feeling. Just open that plain green hardcover with golden lettering and thread bookmark, and try NOT feeling intelligent. Unfortunately there should be some sort of warning against purchasing books based solely on their external aesthetics...

Before I dive into a rather dull tirade (see below: many paragraphs) I want to say that the edition's only truly damning shortcoming is its complete lack of translations. Gibbon, not counting on the sharp decline in Latin awareness, frequently cites original Roman sources using original Roman words and phrases.

Now while it might amuse a scholar or professor to read these excerpts in their unadulterated purity, an amateur like me is left completely in the dark. As a low estimate, I would say that I'm forced to ignore entirely about one fourth of Gibbon's footnotes - and that's not counting what I skip from laziness.

The Everyman's Library set is obviously not for your average reader, but the publisher should at least have updated its review of Gibbon's work. These books still use the editors notes from the 1910 edition, which add almost nothing illuminating or interesting, yet still manage to distract the reader from the narrative.

This 'modern' editor manages to correct Gibbon on some minor, rather forgettable details, but fails to offer any new perspectives that would enlarge our understanding. Very frequently in fact, he seems to snivel over some negligent point of opinion, particularly when it comes to the sanctity of early christianity.

I would not much mind these defensive commentaries, were it not such an obvious sore point with Sir Oliphant (the editor.) Gibbon's severity is well known, and I fully expected a few words of balance to be included in any modern reading, but Smeaton's pedantic invectives are simply tiring.

To wit: "Divest this whole passage of the latent sarcasm betrayed by the subsequent tone of the whole disquisition, and it might commence a Christian history..."

Yes, the editor has surely convinced me that he knows many words.

A variety of other trifles give Oliphant the opportunity to exercise his tone of persnickety condescension. Corrections are fine, but we don't need to hear a paragraph of disquisition on why this or that term has been 'confounded' by Gibbon.

More than anything though, I'm worried about the corrections themselves being outdated. If Smeaton and Gibbon are in disagreement, I really wonder if an entire century of archeology hasn't already settled the argument more firmly. It kind of makes all those trifling notes feel that much more pointless.

Just to really complain now, I'd like to add that I can't open the book wide enough to see the middle of the maps, and I really wish there were more modern appendices - Just give us something more for the sixty dollars we spend.

So in conclusion, box set bad. Pretty; but bad. If you're going to buy a heavy read like this, take awhile to browse the additional material and make sure you're satisfied with it.

Jimmy says

Gibbon's Enlightenment era perspective tends to occlude the accuracy of historical account (as is often the case). What's funny is just how much critical flack this book has received for being inaccurate. In historical context, it may have something to do with Gibbon's ostensibly atheistic views regarding the rise of Christianity that followed the fall of the Roman Empire. He writes about religious zeal with the same indignant revulsion as Freud or Darwin later would. Gibbon does provide a mellifluous and engaging narrative, albeit an astonishingly long one. It's a masterpiece, and if one has the time a worthwhile read. For anyone interested in studies of world civilization, this is an essential text. Just writing this review makes me want to read Arnold Toynbee, and intensifies my admiration for the high standard of British historical studies that we have seen over the past few centuries.

Susan Ames says

I have an old hardbound 7 volume copy of this "book" and have just finished book 3. I can only take it in small doses and frequently re-read sections because of the style of writing - 18th century English. But I will finish it, because it is an amazing chronicle of history that has affected us all for the last millennia. I wish I had read it sooner.

Erik Graff says

I first read an abridged edition of The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in high school, then the complete Modern Library edition upon completing seminary. The decision to do so turned out to be

a good one. Gibbon's dry wit and irony, particularly as regards the Christians, was not so prominent in the abridged version. Indeed, he would be offensive to many, hysterically funny to others.

He is also an excellent writer, many of his passages bearing reading aloud. Indeed, had one the time and the audience, it would be delight to spend the months necessary to do so.

My first reading of *Decline and Fall* was while enrolled in Latin class at Maine Township High School South in Illinois. I was, and am, a poor student of languages, having academically studied German, Spanish, French, Latin and American Sign Language and learning only the last of them well enough to use it, probably owing to its very different character. I was, and am, incapable of rote memorization. The intellect dulls, the eyes grow heavy. At best, I can store the forms, say, of declensions into short-term memory, then they're gone. To survive Latin class I got into the practice of awakening every morning before the sun in order to cram for the quizzes to come that morning. That was good enough to pass, my grades ranging from B to D.

The B grades were probably charitable. Louise Fischer, one of the two Latin teachers I had, was impressed by my knowledge of Roman history and by my derivative notebook which was likely the best in the class. My grammar was all messed up, but my vocabulary wasn't bad. Indeed, learning Latin roots by this means made the work of exegesis with the Greek texts of the Christian scriptures much easier when I later went on to study ancient literature.

Ms. Fischer was, I thought, impossibly old, the oldest teacher I'd ever had, so old and obese that she actually wore knee pads colored to match her skirts for the times she'd fall down. She never did that in class where there were things to hold on to and sit upon, but she fell in the hallways. They probably kept her on because of a lack of younger Latinists and a desire to maintain the school's reputation, Latin having a bit of class, you know. In any case, the only other Latin teacher they'd had, the one I had the second year, didn't last long.

In order to further ingratiate myself with Ms. Fischer I joined Latin Club. It was terrible! Almost all the members of it were, like myself, geeks. Most were geeky girls. The high point of our activities was the celebration of the Saturnalia when we--or our poor mothers--made ourselves togas (in the real Saturnalias togas were eschewed) and ran about the corridors of the Science Building, ostensibly making merry. That was just too much. I quit as unobtrusively as possible, at the end of the semester.

Steve says

Volume 1. Many years ago, I read a 800 or 900 page abridgment, and assumed I had "read" Gibbon. Not so. After reading the first volume, it's clear, you can't cram 6 books into 1 book. Just not the same thing. The author and his achievement are lost in such packaging. Oh, you'll get some good nuggets (Gibbon is great on those), but what you're losing is a true sense of the vastness of Rome, and its history.

And what of that history? The first volume. I'm not even going to try to describe in any detailed way such a crowded book of cruelty, slaughter and personalities. The cycle seems at times endless, as one emperor is replaced (murdered) by another, with revolting legions usually being the cause. Gibbon does put a bright The-Divide-Begins-Here circle around Commodus (chapter IV (180 AD)). Commodus is the bad guy in the movie, *Gladiator*. The movie gets that right. Not the history, but the character.

What follows are wars and power grabs. Gibbon himself, a few times, takes a step back and wonders What

all of this actually means? But the wheel of history does turn. At some point a series of reformist emperors (before getting killed) institute changes within the army that once again make it an instrument of terror (things had slipped, with barbarian invasions ripping the Empire). Which gets us to Diocletian, and his (confusingly named) group of co-emperors. Diocletian's reforms are smart (the Empire had simply become too big to manage), but also burdensome, since the Roman world now gets to support four courts. The added taxes, along with a loss of half the population due to a mysterious years long plague, really put some strain on the system.

Volume 1 concludes with the ascendancy of Constantine. Oh, and then there's a long (and somewhat boring) discussion of Christianity, Jews, etc. At one time, I believe this section was considered controversial. Outside of a some occasional snark, I found (considering the personalities and events which preceded it), dull and abstract.

Don't know when I'll get to Volume 2.

J.W. Dionysius Nicoletto says

Ah yes, this is the edition I recently purchased. Hardcover, unabridged three-volume. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I now begin my ascension into this Tome. There may be another book thrown in for intermission at times, but my desk is well-polished, reading lamp luminous, fresh notebook, pencils, sharpener, new cushioned chair, some pens. I conceived this idea, which believe it or not is part of much larger idea, two years ago, and the time hath cometh. Fasten thy seat-belt, Young Joseph; the time is now.

I've spent the day reading/re-reading the first couple of pages, getting used to the tone. Long haul. Thank nothing.

One of the most unforeseen hilarious encounters right off of the bat is that Gibbon makes Wallace's footnotes look like misplaced wet wipes. Gibbon's prose, so naturally illustrious, is an ardent reminder of the full-blown idiotic level which digitality has rendered our words, archaic abbreviation, futile convenience in the face of retarded mental death. Jest came at a crucial therapeutic point in my life, but man, Wallace just seems more and more like a total drugged out (Legally/Illegally) rambling idiot of his end times, in the face of annihilating historical erudition. An odd reaction. Good, though, as I intend to bury Davey's cornball chewing tobacco addled observational humor anyway, amidst a million other things, in the process of my note-taking concerning structural development for my own Tome in the works. Seems already, like Wake, a book one shall forever have nostalgia for the present in reading for the first time, as one shall never be the same thereafter. Brick by brick.

Bruce says

Decline and Fall, Chapters 1-16 of which were first published in 1776 (contemporaneous to Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, but far less rambling and no less comprehensive) is a wonderful, and wonderfully accessible history of the Roman Empire, ca. 180-1590 CE (although really hearkening in early chapters all

the way back to Marius' salvation of the Republic through Sulla, Caesar, Augustus' ascendancy, and including the achievements and delinquencies of the predecessors of the Antonines). In fact, the book is so accessible you can find it here (I would offer the Project Gutenberg citation, but it's not nearly as browsable. Please ignore CCEL's politics in deference to their superior editorial competence.)

Gibbon's definitive. He even has the ultimate comment on Roman history which I will offer verbatim rather than paraphrase to give Goodreaders the flavor of his prose: "The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long. The victorious legions, who, in distant wars, acquired the vices of strangers and mercenaries, first oppressed the freedom of the republic, and afterwards violated the majesty of the purple. The emperors, anxious for their personal safety and the public peace, were reduced to the base expedient of corrupting the discipline which rendered them alike formidable to their sovereign and to the enemy; the vigour of the military government was relaxed and finally dissolved by the partial institutions of Constantine; and the Roman world was overwhelmed by a deluge of barbarians." (Chapter 39) Well. There it is.

If Decline and Fall has any faults, they lie in Gibbon's devotion to painstaking historical retelling at the expense of a single narrative arc. This is completely excusable inasmuch as Gibbon was the first to synthesize a definitive Empirical history in the English language (and from rigorously documented classical sources, no less)! To a lay reader, though, things get repetitive as hell once the cycle of depravity through military despotism becomes clearly entrenched. This book therefore makes a far more rewarding browse than read.

One last comment -- this work contains far and away the best footnote I've ever read:

"According to Dr. Keating (History of Ireland, p. 13, 14.), the giant Partholanus, who was the son of Seara, the son of Esra, the son of Sru, the son of Framant, the son of Fathaclan, the son of Magog, the son of Japhet, the son of Noah, landed on the coast of Munster, the 14th day of May, in the year of the world 1978. Though he was successful in his great enterprise, the loose behaviour of his wife rendered his domestic life very unhappy, and provoked him to such a degree, that he killed -- her favourite greyhound. This, as the learned historian very properly observes, was the first instance of female falsehood and infidelity ever known in Ireland."

-- Chapter 9, note 13

Woohoo! Its sheer absurdity beggars further comment -- but I will anyway. Gibbon's use of the dash alone... such great comic timing! (In case you were wondering about context, the note stems from Gibbon's consideration of the mythological origins of the proto-Viking germanic peoples (the Goths), in a passage where he cites these as being held in common with "the wild Irishman as well as the wild Tartar." To ape Gibbon's style, this note is the author's nod to the origins of the former as a mere reference to author/title is accorded the latter.) I take it that Gibbon found Keating's work more entertaining than Abulghazi Bahadur Khan's "Genealogical History of the Tartars." If so, it's no wonder this work of Keating's is far easier than Khan's to find online. Wheee! What fun this learning stuff is.

Terese says

I read this one summer while working as a temp during college, I found the set at a garage sale. My assignment, answering the phones (in a small closet made mostly of glass) at an advertising agency, was making me feel low and stupid so these books were my antidote. Who could make fun of a temp reading

Gibbon?

As I recall I wound up with a little notebook full of lists of characters and family trees so that as I read along and forgot what had happened earlier I could refresh my memory. At times, bored witless, I wanted to end the madness and read some lovely summertime garbage but I forced myself to finish. Of the books I remember nothing, of the process, everything.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

The local book shop made this set available to me last night. Three volumes, hardcover with dust jackets, seemingly unread condition, no marks no owner's name, (but) no slip case, damage limited to common shipping related corner-crush but otherwise as-new -- US\$28 amounts to much pocket-change-savings over the typical abe\$175. That be \$2 in excess of the cover price of Danielewski's latest.

Proust2013/Gibbon2013. Any brave souls to schedule this one?

Charles Gonzalez says

Four books complete , two more to go. Book four focuses on the reign of Justinian and his wife, Theodora, who was elevated to queen by virtue of her marriage. Justinian is a complex character, eager to reign strong and well but suffering from very real human limitations of morality, confidence and trust. The highlight and pinnacle of Justinian's reign are the martial accomplishments of Belisarius, the general that Gibbon ranks with the exploits of Alexander in terms of personal bravery in battle. Belisarius is almost too good to be true, a loyal servant to his king, brilliant in strategic and tactical thinking, a hero and leader to his men, a just and thoughtful governor of conquered regions. Also, politically savvy enough to survive his return to Constantinople and the envy of the court.

While Gibbon's reputation for historical accuracy has been dented by 200 years of new scholarship, as far as I can see, no writer comes close to his almost lyrical narrative that, while executed in 18 century English is still a wonder to behold and does not inhibit the patient readers understanding.

So 2000 pages to get to the sixth century, the balance of the story to take me to the victory of the Turks in the 15th. Other commentators have written that the last third of the Decline is a difficult and less than gripping slog. That may be, though I foresee great opportunity for nuggets of exquisite prose and historical insight in those 1300 pages.
