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HUME and GIBBON: A View from a Vantage

WHETHER ONE IS AN ECONOMIC, INTELLECTUAL, OR SOCIAL HISTORIAN of England, 1776 is a year of particular importance. The American knows 1776 as the year of the Revolution; the English school child dates Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* from that year, and many consider its publication of greater importance; David Hume died in 1776, and the first volume of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* quickly sold out.

The lives of Hume and Gibbon form an interesting contrast. While both were born into similar circumstances, the fact that Hume was born in Scotland and Gibbon in the Home Counties was to make a profound difference. Hume was born on April 26, 1711, in Edinburgh, probably in the family's town house during his father's spring visit to the city from his home west of Berwick, Ninewells. The facts of Hume's life are not well known, and there is still some debate as to whether "Berwick" was Berwick-on-Tweed or North Berwick. His father, Joseph Hume, was a well-to-do landowner, a descendant of the distinguished Home family, a spelling which young David assumed for some time. His mother was a far greater influence in his life, however, for his father died while David was quite young; Mrs. Hume was the third daughter of Sir David Falconer, President of the Court of Session, and a rigorous, well-educated woman. David was a second son, and had one sister. As a result, he had no opportunity to acquire the Ninewells property, and after his early training, either in a parish school or under a private tutor, he entered the University of Edinburgh, where he quickly abandoned his law course in favor of natural science.

At the age of eighteen, on the verge of "a great philosophical discovery," as he says in his autobiography, Hume suffered a nervous breakdown. During his three years of illness he studied French, Latin, and Italian, and at the age of twenty-three he decided to study in Descartes' *alma mater,* La Fleche, a Jesuit College. His writing career began at twenty-six when he wrote his "Treatise on Human Nature," selling it

in 1739 for £50. He expected a great literary reception, but "it fell deadborn", and he returned to Ninewells to make a second effort at literary fame with the well-received "Essays Moral and Political." Hume hoped to get the chair of ethics at Edinburgh, but through the treachery of his two best friends, who charged him with atheism, he failed to do so. Disillusioned, he became the travelling tutor for an insane Marquis and, despite his later success as an historian, entered into a life strewn with ludicrous events. In 1752 he published his "Political Discourses," a success from the start, especially in France, where he had the good fortune to have an excellent translator. In the previous year he had written his "Dialogues Concerning National Religion" and then locked them away in his desk to await resurrection by his friend, Adam Smith, in 1779.

Now Hume turned to the study of history. His reasons for doing so are vague; as always, he was an opportunist, and history presented the best available sinecure to him. Failing to get the chair of logic at Glasgow, he became keeper of the largest library in Scotland, the library of the Faculty of Advocates. This opportunity, together with his discouragement of winning recognition in England in philosophy, and a trip to Turin, which interested him in history, was to result in the first volume of his *magnum opus,* the *History of England,* published in 1754.

In the same year the tag "atheist" brought Hume down once again and, censured by the curators of the library for buying "indecent literature," he resigned. Under constant attack, and with few friends except the blind poet, Thomas Blacklock, he welcomed an opportunity to go to France in 1763 as secretary to the Ambassador. In Paris he became friends with D'Alembert and Turgot, with whom he is often compared, and eventually became *chargé.*

Later he returned to Scotland where a ridiculous affair with Rousseau, whom he offered asylum over the *Emile* incident, provided his life with a little *opera bouffe* relief. After Rousseau returned to France, declaring that the Scottish fog was driving him insane, Hume became an Under Secretary and waxed fat both bodily and financially. In 1775 he took ill with a liver complaint, and on August 25, 1776, he died, in a state of perfect calm—in the opinion of many a most outrageous way for an atheist to die. Even in death he was faced with this erroneous tag, and a hostile crowd tried to prevent his burial.

Edward Gibbon's life, unlike his writings, is far less colourful. Born in April, 1737, in Putney, Surrey, of a well-to-do family whose wealth was amassed by grandfather Gibbon, an army contractor, Edward was in the personally fortunate position of being the first of seven sons and the only one to survive. As a result, he was as-

sured an income. He was related to the Actons, and his relations in turn include his namesake. Edward Gibbon Wakefield.

Edward was sickly, and his experience of being dragged from doctor to doctor may account for his later unwillingness to take a fatal complaint to medical help. He was educated at a boarding school at Kingston-upon-Thames—not a venturesome undertaking, for the school was less than six miles from his home. At ten he was taken out of school because of his mother's death, and subsequently an aunt, Miss Catherine Porter, helped with his education. His leaning toward scholarship probably dates from a stay of nine months at his grandfather's home, where he practically lived in the library. His first acquaintance with his ultimate craft was through Hearne's *Short System of Universal History,* which may account for Gibbon's later tendency to "have all the answers." With an encyclopediac mind he collected detail feverishly, another tendency which clearly appears in his writings: distances between places, courses followed by rivers—their length, depth, and flow—the detail of a Persian banquet, the composition of Greek fire—all this he dutifully memorized.

At fifteen Gibbon entered Magdalen College, Oxford, "with a stock of erudition which might have puzzled a doctor, and a degree of ignorance of which a schoolboy would have been ashamed." The college was at a low ebb, filled with "port and prejudice", and Gibbon distinguished himself in no way except in always being late to class. More important than Oxford was his conversion to Catholicism.

This conversion was the result of Gibbon's reading of the refutations of Dr. Conyers Middleton's "Free Inquiry." Already the historian at heart, he made his decision through cold reason, "by the weight of historical evidence...." His father withdrew him from the University, for legally he faced possible execution, although there was little danger of such severe punishment. As a result the errant son was hustled off to Lausanne to be "saved" by a Calvinist minister, M. Pavillard. This man was to be the most important formative influence in Gibbon's life. Although he was badly fed (food was of great importance to the already corpulent Gibbon), he was well instructed by Pavillard, who recognized his genius and let Edward do all of the talking, arguing himself back to Protestantism. Although he received the sacrament once again, he also embraced Hume's dictum that to be a true Christian one should be a philosophical skeptic as well.

Gibbon set about learning Greek at a methodical 500 lines a day, took voluminous notes, and read with no specific plan in mind: "It is more important to follow the bent of one's genius than to define the character and scope of one's investigations. At length I begin to perceive whither my researches tend...." Like all good scholars, Gibbon was also a great novel reader, and Fielding's *Tom Jones* may have

influenced the form of his last three volumes. At the same time he learned French, became fast friends with Voltaire, George Deyverdun, and John Holroyd (later Lord Sheffield), and fell in love—in his own fashion. Apparently each great man must be made to appear ridiculous at least once: Hume over Rousseau, Gibbon over Suzanne Curchod (later Madame Necker). His father refused him permission to marry, and "he sighed as a lover, obeyed as a son", and accepted an inheritance instead of a wife, although Madame Necker never quite gave up, even after she became the mother of a daughter (who grew up to be Madame de Stael).

At twenty, two years later than Hume, Gibbon first began to write, although, like Hume, he chose to put his manuscript away in a desk for an additional two years before submitting it for publication. For his first book, an essay on literature written in French, Gibbon received no pay but forty-three complimentary copies—which he found difficult to get rid of until favorable reviews on the Continent made the book a mild success. Unlike Hume, Gibbon had a poor translator throughout his life, and this essay suffered gross errors when put into English (*"si la Physique a ses Buffons"* became "if Physics hath its buffoons"), as did his masterwork when it was translated into French.

Gibbon acquired a valuable knowledge of army life as a captain in the Hampshire militia, and he was sent on the Grand Tour as a result of his reconversion. In Italy he underwent "several days of [intellectual] intoxication" and became convinced that "never before existed such a nation, and I hope for the happiness of mankind there never will." At this time he conceived of his great history: "It was at Rome on the 15th of October, 1764, 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 started to my mind."

Gibbon returned to London, began and dropped a history of Switzerland, and then, with Deyverdun, launched a journal to keep foreigners informed of the progress of English literature—a publication which sold only twelve copies. He entered politics, being elected to a seat in Parliament in 1774. He did not speak for eight years, thus giving "silent assent" to the American war, silence for which he was criticized later. Elected to the Literary Club, he associated with Boswell, Reynolds, Goldsmith, Burke, Garrick, Fox, Sheridan, and Smith, and was stimulated to begin his contemplated history of Rome.

Volume I was well received, and in 1776 Gibbon awoke no less than Lord Byron to find himself famous. In 1779 he wrote a vindication of his work, which had been charged with anti-Christianity, and in 1781 he published his second volume, received by the Duke of Gloucester as "Another damned thick square book! Always

scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh! Mr. Gibbon?" Nevertheless, by now Gibbon was growing wealthy from his volumes, partially because of the scandal: Horace Walpole's mistress read them on Walpole's advice and was horrified and bored alternately, and Louis XVI began a translation, but was so shocked at Chapter 15 that he felt constrained to stop—although he read on, keeping the books under his pillows. Gibbon was charged with living out "his sex life in his footnotes." Volume V was especially attacked for indecency of notation, and when the *Gentleman's Magazine* published "striking examples" the issue quickly sold out.

To all practical purposes Gibbon had lived his life when these volumes were completed, and perhaps he knew it, for in his *Memoirs* he wrote a most striking conclusion:

> I shall now commemorate the hour of my final deliverance. It was on the day, or rather the night, of the 27th of June, 1787, between the hours of eleven and twelve, that I wrote the last lines of that last page in a summer-house in my garden. After laying down my pen, I took several turns in a *berceau,* or covered walk of acacias, which commands a prospect of the country, the lake and the mountains. The air was temperate, the sky was serene, the silver orb of the moon was reflected from the waters, and all nature was silent. I will not dissemble the first emotions of joy on recovery of my freedom, and perhaps, the establishment of my fame. But my pride was soon humbled, and a sober melancholy was spread over my mind, by the idea that I had taken an everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion, and that whatsoever might be the future fate of my History, the life of the historian must be short and precarious."

Seven years later, at 57, with little else accomplished, Gibbon was dead, already an honored figure for his intellectual statement of eighteenth-century opinion.

II

The best way to approach Hume and Gibbon historiographically is to contrast their ideas and methods in relation to four fields: the functions of history, their political views, their religious views, and their views on the place of literature in history.

Gibbon had a more complete theory of the functions of history than did Hume, for two reasons: his entry into the historical brotherhood was less opportunistic, and he wrote with less of a political bias so that, aside from his acceptance of the prevailing view that history must find a moral, he was free to develop his thoughts more fully.

So far as we know, Hume never composed a *raison d'état* for the study of history, as Gibbon did in his *Vindication*. However, implicit in Hume's writings are a number of such reasons: that history is a means of revealing the workings, or failure

to work, of rational processes; that history—as he shows in his treatment of James I—is a study in flux, and that since man's views of absolutes are fluid, the skeptical approach is the only firm approach to the past. As a result, history may be read to support his view that the natural genius of mankind is the same from one age to another. In contrast to this view, which ran counter to those of Hume's century, Gibbon could be read to illustrate that man was getting better and better. Superficially, Gibbon's world is one in which "God's in his Heaven—/All's right with the world!", while Hume was hesitant to use either "God" or "world" as measuring sticks. Gibbon's history could be read as a moral lesson: that mankind was rapidly climbing out of the pit of the Dark Ages of Christendom back to the age of reason which had been dominant under the Romans. But he injected other moral lessons into his writings, lessons which the eighteenth century failed to notice, especially his vague general "cause" for the fall of Rome: "the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight." This could be true of all empires, and in the early Victorian and mid-twentieth-century periods this view was to win him renewed popularity.

Gibbon had no philosophical theory of history, no "scientific approach" as we think of it today. He was interested in personalities and panoramas. As a result, his long lists of "causes" often seem naïve, for he talks in terms of specifics, not abstracts, social forces, or economic trends. As an accidental result, as Bury points out, Gibbon actually has been responsible for the textbook tendency to list "causes" of events in relation to Hellenic civilization. Gibbon has managed to live because he rarely explains anything, although he gives an appearance of explaining all. Hume's works have passed from common knowledge because he lacked imagination; he was too "political" and thus stamped in time, while Gibbon had the seal of eternity upon him.

The key words to what theory Gibbon did have are three: "Our immortal reason." He was a child of his age, of the age of reason, of Voltaire and Locke, while Hume was in rebellion against his age, favoring a return to imagination and intuition or understanding. Gibbon shared the common view of the value of ancient history, although he did not fully share the century's views on the progress of man. Here he broke with the Age of Reason, for he viewed history as an unending war, saw no real progress from Roman days, and felt that the periods of Domitian or Marcus Aurelius were the zenith of human achievement. Thereafter, the forces of "barbarism and Christianity" brought about the fall of Rome, and the Dark Ages, the period of Christian rule, set in.

Hume had no desire to justify the theory of progress, although he was him-

self of Whig leanings. He wrote his history of England partly to amuse himself, not to glorify a past age; and since he could observe little progress, he chose to write of a time closer to his own. In the opinion of Whig readers, Hume's history had definite Tory leanings, and as a result in the second edition he found himself making many corrections "to the Tory side." Hume was not concerned with change, with fall or progress, but with stability. The stability of governments he attributed to power and authority: he chose to use the words "habit" and "education" when speaking of the conventions of religion, but they are clearly the same. The stability of monarchies arose, he felt, from superstitious reverence for princes and priests. Nevertheless, the manners of people underwent a great change from one age to another because of modifications in education, government, and religion. Where his history tended to show this shifting of attitudes, members of the Whig Supremacy thought in terms of Lockean absolutes and inherent rights in the political realm; as a result, though Hume was well read, he was not well liked.

In matters of religion Hume and Gibbon seemed, superficially, much closer together, and both were charged with atheism. However, Hume's atheism was derived from hostility to the lethargic and moralistic church of the eighteenth century and was as positive in its defence of revealed religion as it was negative in its attack; Gibbon's atheism, although based upon the same skepticism, was a totally negative reaction to revealed religion as practised in the primitive church, and therefore, by implication, more in favor of its "logical" eighteenth-century form. Hume's religious views were the result of philosophical conviction; Gibbon's were an emotional reaction to what he considered to be the primary cause of the fall of man's greatest state.

Three statements on Christianity in particular brought Gibbon under attack, an attack far greater, and much longer, than that upon Hume. Gibbon called the martyrs of the Church "the implacable enemies not only of the Roman government but of human kind," and the monks "a swarm of fanatics incapable of fear, or reason, or humanity." Finally in Volume VII he wrote, "from these innocent barbarians the reproach may be transferred to the Catholics of Rome."

As Shelby McCloy has demonstrated, the attack on Gibbon was far greater than has commonly been supposed. The first attacks were anonymous, as they usually are; soon came the Oxford "replies" of Chelsum and Randolph, and of 22-year-old Davis of Balliol. Davis' "declaration of war" was significant, for it produced Gibbon's *Vindication,* his only self-defence. There also were attacks from the Cambridge school, led by Watson and Apthrop. Milner, also of Cambridge, chose to renew the attack on Gibbon's sexual morals and especially found offence in the his-

torian's references to the seduction of a young unmarried woman "as one of the most amiable weaknesses of human nature." Welsh patriots were angered over Gibbon's statement that ancient Palestine was hardly "superior to Wales either in fertility or extent." He was charged with indecent writings "veiled... in the obscurity of a learned language", and editions "safe for children"—the worst attack of all—soon appeared. Others were offended that Gibbon spoke of St. George, Patron of England, in the same breath as St. Denis, Patron of France. After his single defence, however, Gibbon was content to let the attacks go unanswered and to grow wealthy over the controversy. Years later his writings were to be adopted by the Society for the Promotion of Atheism in America and by the English Theosophical Society and the argument was to be renewed, using Thomas Bowdler's versions.

Nevertheless, despite their divergent views on history, politics, and religion, both Hume and Gibbon were widely read in their time. But Gibbon has lived and Hume has not, for several reasons. Perhaps the most important is the simple fact that Gibbon believed that all writing should be great literature, while Hume labored to clarify an idea and thus failed to provide "quotable quotes" in his generalizations. Gibbon was a literary artist and labored to give a sonorous, even Biblical, tone to his writings. An admirer of Tacitus and Polybius, he consciously copied them stylistically. Hume copied no one, and his writings tended to be pedestrian in style. In addition, Gibbon made all knowledge the province of his history. As Carl Becker points out, the eighteenth century was one of encyclopaedic knowledge, often without assimilation; Gibbon was representative of this tendency, and he thus presented a panorama so broad as to give his reader the feeling that he was both learning and learned to be able to follow Gibbon's discourse. Hume was more inclined to the monographic approach; depth, not breadth, marked his writings, and depth is less palatable to most readers. Nonetheless, Gibbon was a careful researcher for his time and read all of the available materials before writing. Today much of his work, especially that dealing with the Byzantine phase of Roman history, has been greatly revised, but the core of Gibbon's first three volumes remains unchanged, and he continues to be necessary reading for any student of ancient history.

The same is not true of Hume. Paradoxically, his books were poorly researched. In 1774 the King offered him access to his personal records, an opportunity most historians would have grasped in the nineteenth century, but Hume did not bother to examine them. He wrote in much the same way as an undergraduate writes a theme: with three or four books spread before him on a table, taking pertinent parts of each and putting them together to make a fifth. As a result, Hume's work has been displaced as English history.

Nevertheless, neither Gibbon nor Hume has been, or is likely to be, displaced as an eighteenth-century historian. Both can be read for an understanding of their age. Historians may prefer Gibbon today, partially because he left more unanswered questions, more food for thought, than did Hume. Theological controversy still can be stirred by the mention that Tiberius once thought of making Christ one of the gods in the Roman Pantheon. Had he done so, would Christianity have lost its vitality, and Rome not have fallen? No other historian before Gibbon had such a concept of the continuity of history. Gibbon has wit, irony (which he learned from Pascal), and breadth. His attitude toward revealed religion continues to be shared today, including our cliché that people were more "religious" in the Middle Ages (very possibly an untrue statement). His book is both a history of Rome and of the eighteenth century, thus serving a dual purpose. Today, as by the end of the eighteenth century, scholarly opinion has chosen Gibbon above Hume. E. L. Woodward declares that Gibbon "easily eclipses" Hume, and James Westfall Thompson finds Gibbon to be one of the two great historians of the time, the other being Ranke (for whom the present writer has somewhat higher regard). Churchill's style owes much to Gibbon, as did Cardinal Newman's, and Hollywood's dubious honors demonstrate how Gibbon has touched even the lives of the popcorn and balcony set.

Gibbon chose to write of the fall, not the "rise and fall," as is sometimes said, of an Empire. Many great historians, including Thucydides, Prescott, Spengler, and Toynbee have chosen this theme, and its negativism is popular with a skeptical age. Historians have been prone to follow Gibbon's lead, for, as Mark Van Doren has remarked, "historical consciousness arises out of a sense of loss." Whether Gibbon wrote of an Indian summer or not, as Toynbee says (and imitates), he shared the Voltairean view that there were four great periods in history: Greek, Augustan, Renaissance, and that of Louis XIV. Until the advent of the nineteenth-century's nationalistic historians, this view continued to be shared. Gibbon managed to bridge the centuries, and many of his ideas are remarkably in keeping with those of the twentieth century. Toynbee's "challenge and response" is but a more sophisticated approach to "barbarism and Christianity," the *Welterwanderung* and universal church. Essentially, we like Gibbon today for the same reason he was liked in the eighteenth century—he agrees with our preconceptions and does not upset our established views.