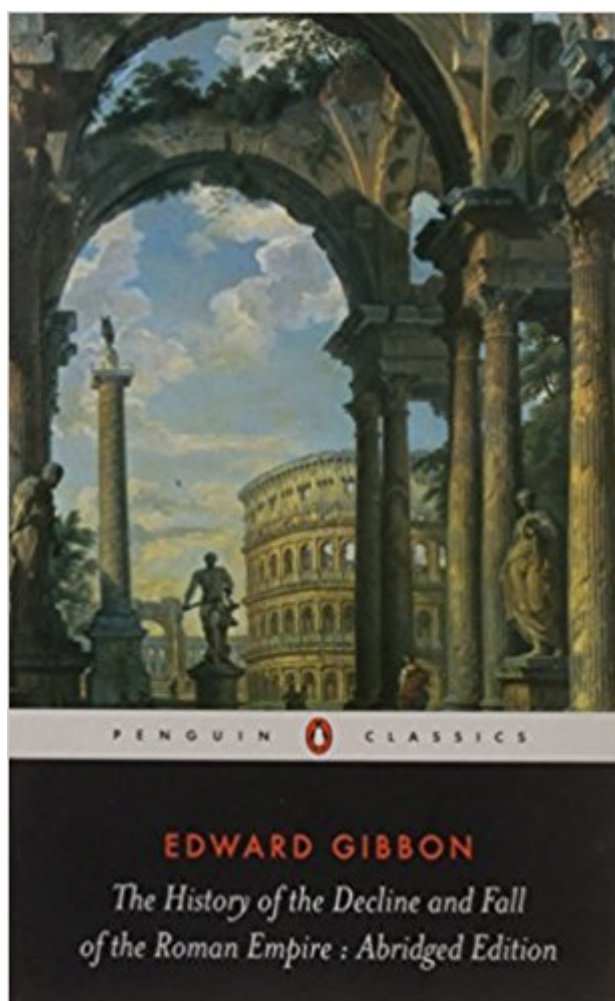


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# The History Of The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

Edward Gibbon's six-volume *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88) is among the most magnificent and ambitious narratives in European literature. Its subject is the fate of one of the world's greatest civilizations over thirteen centuries - its rulers, wars and society, and the events that led to its disastrous collapse. Here, in volumes three and four, Gibbon vividly recounts the waves of barbarian invaders under commanders such as Alaric and Attila, who overran and eventually destroyed the West. He then turns his gaze to events in the East, where even the achievements of the Byzantine emperor Justinian and the campaigns of the brilliant military leader Belisarius could not conceal the fundamental weaknesses of their empire. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

Edward Gibbon was born in 1737 in Putney, England, and was the only child of his parents to survive infancy. Although his education was frequently interrupted by ill health, his knowledge was far-reaching. His brief career as an undergraduate at Magdalen College, Oxford, ended when he joined the Catholic Church. His father sent him to Lausanne, in Switzerland, where, while studying

Greek and French for the next five years, he re-joined the Protestant Church. In 1761 he published his *Essai sur l'État de la Littérature*; the English version appeared in 1764. Meanwhile, Gibbon served as a captain in the Hampshire Militia until 1763, when he returned to the Continent. It was while he was in Rome in 1764 that he first conceived the work that was eventually to become *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In 1774, after the death of his father, Gibbon settled in London and was elected to Parliament where he sat for the next eight years, although he never once spoke in the Commons. He also took his place among the literary circles of London. The first volume of his famous *History* was published in 1776; it was highly praised for its learning and style but incurred some censure for its treatment of the early Christians. The second and third volumes appeared in 1781 and the final three, which were written in Lausanne, in 1788. He died while on a visit to his friend, Lord Sheffield, who posthumously edited Gibbon's autobiographical papers and published them in 1796. David Womersley teaches at Jesus College, Oxford, and edited Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* for Penguin Classics.

I will append a single proviso to my five-star rating: to enjoy this book, you will need a somewhat decent command of the English language and the capacity to unpack dense meaning. Gibbon's prose, to my mind, is almost without par; however, it is very much written in the Enlightenment style, which was more complex than what we accustomed to from today's workman-like scribblers. Therefore, if you dislike long, complicated sentences, it's probable that you won't enjoy this work. Also if you're a teenager, I might suggest you perhaps start with someone like Will Durant, who has a nice style of his own, but is much easier for the youngsters to comprehend. Unless you're a whizz kid, then by all means jump on this immediately. Perhaps a representative passage will get my point across: "Of the various forms of government which have prevailed in the world, an hereditary monarchy presents the fairest scope for ridicule. Is it possible to relate without an indignant smile, that, on the father's death, the property of a nation, like that of a drove of oxen, descends to his infant son, as yet unknown to mankind and to himself, and that the bravest warriors and the wisest statesmen, relinquishing their natural right to empire, approach the royal cradle with bended knees and protestations of inviolable fidelity? Satire and declamation may paint these obvious topics in the most dazzling colours, but our more serious thoughts will respect a useful prejudice, that establishes a rule of succession, independent of the passions of mankind; and we shall cheerfully acquiesce in any expedient which deprives the multitude of the dangerous, and indeed the ideal, power of giving themselves a master. In the cool shade of retirement, we may easily devise imaginary forms of government, in which the sceptre shall be constantly bestowed on the

most worthy by the free and incorrupt suffrage of the whole community. Experience overturns these airy fabrics, and teaches us that in a large society the election of a monarch can never devolve to the wisest or to the most numerous part of the people. The army is the only order of men sufficiently united to concur in the same sentiments, and powerful enough to impose them on the rest of their fellow-citizens; but the temper of soldiers, habituated at once to violence and to slavery, renders them very unfit guardians of a legal or even a civil constitution. Justice, humanity, or political wisdom, are qualities they are too little acquainted with in themselves to appreciate them in others. Valour will acquire their esteem, and liberality will purchase their suffrage; but the first of these merits is often lodged in the most savage breasts; the latter can only exert itself at the expense of the public; and both may be turned against the possessor of the throne by the ambition of a rival. The superior prerogative of birth, when it has obtained the sanction of time and popular opinion, is the plainest and least invidious of all distinctions among mankind. The acknowledged right extinguishes the hopes of faction, and the conscious security disarms the cruelty of the monarch."If you were able to read those three paragraphs without much trouble, and understood exactly what he was saying, then you should be to digest this work. Pay attention to the style, too. Do you like those long sentences, the vivid imagery of the wordplay? Some people do not. If you are one of those people, you will not make it through this work (it is almost 4,000 pages). Some people call it florid. I don't agree. I love Gibbon's style, and was disappointed after finishing the sixth volume that I had no more to read. Not to worry, though, as it holds up exceedingly well to repeat reading (usually I just return to read a chapter here, or there, on whatever topic I am interested in at the moment). Also pay attention to not just the style of the above three paragraphs, but the viewpoint Gibbon was expressing. Keep in mind, Gibbon wrote in the 1700s. His viewpoint is hardly postmodern, and he is a particularly stern judge in almost all respects: of history, of character, of society. That said, his book remains remarkably (but not entirely) free of racial bigotry. You only need to look up some of Immanuel Kant's quotes to realise that how exceptional this is for the period when Gibbon wrote. Be assured, however, that you may not agree with many of Gibbon's opinions. If you can't suspend your judgement when you read, if you only like to read authors whose sociopolitical views you share, then you may not be able to stick this one out. My suggestion would be to try, however. On to the actual material Gibbon covers. If you're looking for any material on Rome under the Kings, Republican Rome, or the early Empire, then you've come to the wrong place. Gibbon does provide us with a brief, single-chapter account of the Empire and its Emperors from Augustus to Domitian, and two opening chapters on the age of the Antonines (which Gibbon and most scholars consider to have been the peak of the Empire in almost every respect). The real

narrative, however, picks up with the death of Marcus Aurelius and the accession to sole rule of his son, Commodus, in 180AD. If you don't know much Roman history, and these names are still familiar to you, perhaps you've seen *Gladiator*? Marcus Aurelius is the old Emperor whom Russell Crowe serves at the beginning. Commodus is the Joaquin Phoenix character. That film wasn't really based on any true story, but these definitely were father and son in real life, and incidentally Commodus really did things like fight as a gladiator. Some of the stories Gibbon tells are quite amusing. We hear that Commodus had special arrows made, whose tips were shaped like crescent moons. He could, apparently, decapitate a sprinting ostrich by firing one of these from his bow. Commodus thought nothing of killing a lion in single combat. An elephant too. All in the arena, as his subjects watched. Some stories about other Emperors are clearly far-fetched: we are told the Emperor Maximin (known to us as Maximinus Thrax) was over 8 feet tall, could drink 7 gallons of wine and eat between 30-40 pounds of meat in a day, could break a horse's leg with a punch, and crumble stones in his fists. However, Gibbon is a sober historian. He never falls for a tall tale. If he tells one, it is for amusement or colour. He always provides his sources, and he is an astute judge of a source's quality. Gibbon always, if possible, practices what he calls "ascending to the font," by which he means never settling for a secondary source if a primary source is available. All these traits made him remarkable as a historian for his period. Volume I takes the reader until the triumph of Constantine the Great over his rivals in the early 4th Century AD. It then concludes with the first of what were considered the most controversial chapters of the book. Volume II begins with the second. These "controversial" chapters (15 & 16) dealt with the origin of Christianity, and its character and evolution in the roughly three centuries until Constantine founded Constantinople as a new, Christian Rome (Constantine actually called it Nova Roma, but the people were having none of that). Now chapters 15 & 16 caused quite the stir in Gibbon's day. You can go and read on Wikipedia about the accusations made against Gibbon because of what the chapters contained. Honestly, though, for the twenty-first century, they are extremely tame. It is to Gibbon's credit, however, that throughout the book when he does dedicate chapters entirely to religion, he at least in most cases avoids inflicting terminal boredom on the reader. Volume II takes the reader until the first part of Theodosius the Great's career. Volume III shoots just past the end of the Empire in the West, ending with a chapter on some of the barbarians who came to exercise sovereignty in the former Imperial lands. Volume IV covers Justinian and his immediate successors, still ruling as the Roman Empire in the East, and in the West continues covering the Barbarian successor kingdoms. The scheme of the work changes a little when the reader arrives at Volumes V and VI. Gibbon did not put much stock in the so-called Byzantine empire. In the final chapter of Volume IV he in fact covers

800 years of Byzantine empires, whereas he had just spent four volumes covering about half that amount of time. So if you were hoping for an extremely in-depth coverage of the Byzantine Empire, you'll be sorely disappointed, as I initially was (if this is the case, I suggest you look to the excellent works of John Julius Norwich). Instead, in Volumes V and VI, Gibbon covers the histories of the nations erected on the ruins of the West Roman Empire, along with those territories lost to enemies in the East. This takes the reader through a varied journey: the Caliphates; the Turkish Sultanates; the Crusades and Crusader Kingdoms; the exploits of the Normans in France, Italy, and elsewhere; the Bulgarians; the Hungarians; Russia; the Papacy; the Italian states; and more. All said and done, the complete work took me about 15 months to read. I took my time, reading about half an hour per day. Some days I'd read an hour, some days only ten minutes. I made sure to read it every day, however. Take your time. Get into a habit of reading this, one bite-sized chunk at a time. You'll be glad you did.

There are books; there are great books; and then there are books that change everything - that test you and change you and impact you permanently and profoundly. Homer, Shakespeare, Dickens...those sorts of authors shake you and challenge you to grow. Gibbon, deservedly considered one of the fathers of modern history and the historical method, ranks among those authors. The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire displays a fine example of literary genius, representing some of the very best humanity has to offer. If, faced with the extinction of the human race and the loss of all things we've learned throughout our history, the lone survivors were bequeathed a top ten list of written works aimed at condensing human thought and evolution into the most valuable lessons and wisdom of the ages in the interest of providing the surest and most beneficial foundation for starting anew, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire should be in it. Yes, it's that important and that good. Aptly titled, Gibbon explains not only the historical nuts and bolts of what happened when but more importantly why. As incredibly ambitious as it is valuable, Gibbon traces the history of Rome's demise from its height (around the 1st century) to/through the dark/middle ages (to around 1500 A.D.), giving a sweeping and astonishing view of a period of our history that still has no equal. Gibbon not only shows us Rome; for those willing to look he holds a mirror before humanity...shows us who we are, largely where we came from, emboldens our virtues and warns us of our vices, and shows that while the context and names may change, the essential core of issues human beings face remains the same. If no other evidence existed for why you should read this work, consider that despite being written over 200 years ago, Gibbon is still considered the gold standard when it comes to Rome, and while some additional historical facts have since come

to light that invalidate minor details of Gibbon's narrative, the essence of the work remains untarnished. I won't mislead you, however, weighing in at six volumes and approximately 2000 pages, combined with Gibbon's amazing vocabulary (make sure you have a dictionary handy), gift of beautiful but initially intimidating denseness of narration and prose, and somewhat dry (but fiercely insightful, very witty, and at times even humorous) style, if you're not a history teacher or letters major the work is an ambitious read for most, but I would encourage you in the purest sense to conquer it. I promise you, "there's gold in them there hills." I once met a 95 year old history and philosophy professor with whom I developed a brief but memorable friendship. A very intelligent, lucid, gentle, wise, and amiable man, during one of our conversations, knowing him a voracious reader and very educated person, I asked him to give me a list of his favorite books - ones he would recommend without hesitation. The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire was the first book(s) he mentioned. I never forgot, and in fact made an inward commitment that I would read it someday. Years later I did, and my only regret is that I didn't read it sooner, and that I'll never get to discuss it with him. I'll be forever grateful for the advice.

Just wanted to comment that the formatting errors that the previous reviews have mentioned seem to be fixed. I've clicked around on the footnotes of all three volumes, and from what I've seen they're all properly linked. Greek writing and other special characters seem to be properly formatted too . This is a pretty massive book, so I might have missed something, but from what I can tell this is a well-formatted Kindle edition.

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