Reading for Pleasure

Decline and fall

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At the end of the eighteenth century a small stout man, not much more than five foot in height, walked on the terrace of his house in Lausanne with a lady of quite extraordinary beauty. As they reached the side steps that led down to the garden, the stout gentleman fell to his knees, clasped together his hands, and, in a voice rendered hoarse with emotion, suddenly proposed marriage. The lady—"bewitching animal"—appeared startled. Brusquely, she refused the offer and ordered her companion to rise, but this he was unable to do. Such was his corpulence that he could regain his feet only with the help of his servants, who issued from the house hardly able to contain their smiles.

The ardent lover was Edward Gibbon, who at that stage of his life was already the most famous of contemporary authors: the reluctant girl was Lady Elizabeth Foster, whose profile was a byword among the gallants of the period. Lady Elizabeth's features have now been forgotten, but Gibbon's prose, thank goodness, is still reprinted and is readily available to those who wish to enjoy it.

No endurance test

During a recent convalescence, when time passed slowly, I was able to achieve a lifelong ambition and read the whole of the famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. My wife duly produced the first two volumes of an old leather-bound set that had been collecting dust in the spare room ever since we moved into our present house. The books were heavy, and the whole prospect rather daunting. Was my ambition to outstrip my powers of endurance? I opened the first volume with its neat rows of Baskerville type and began at the beginning: "In the second century of the Christian Aera, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilised portion of mankind."

Within minutes the work takes its hold on the reader. The sentences, so subtly constructed and so perfectly balanced, invest the story of events with an enchantment and a grace that belong to Gibbon alone. His learning gave the book its eminence, but it is his style that the reader remembers and that lingers afterwards like some wayward perfume.

The whole history is marked by lucidity and completeness, and remains substantially accurate. It falls into three divisions: from the age of Trajan to the subversion of the Western empire; from Justinian's reign to the establishment of Charlemagne's

empire; from the revival of the Western empire to the fall of Constantinople. It covers a period of nearly 13 centuries, and shows us how the modern world was linked with and derived from the ancient world.

Gibbon paints his picture on a vast canvas, but for me there remains in retrospect the memory of numerous delightful cameos—the description of Nero and the fire that raged in Rome, the personality of Genghis Khan, the comets and meteors that lit up the skies of Justinian's imperial reign, and the detailed descriptions of the Roman games and the chariot races with their team colours and divisions, not unlike our modern soccer.

I finished the first volume in two days and passed on to the second. It was no endurance test; it was a fascinating crime story of ancient history, written by a man whose command of the English language has seldom, if ever, been equalled. His meaning is always crystal clear, yet his beautifully polished sentences retain an elegant cadence that gives to his lines many of the qualities one finds in poetry. By the time I had finished the first volume, my wife had taken it up with relish.

The work was to occupy Gibbon for some 20 years of his life. "It was in Rome on the 15th of October, 1764," he tells us, "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 in my mind."

Man of history

Born in 1737, Edward Gibbon was educated at Westminster School and Magdalen College, Oxford. At the age of 16 he became a Roman Catholic and was sent by his father to Lausanne, where he was reconverted and first discovered his love for literature and history. It was here that he became attached to Susanne Curchod, but in deference to his father's wishes, broke off the engagement and returned to England. ("I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son.")

The death of his father left him with sufficient money to move into a house in Bentinck Street and to form a library so that he might undertake the first volume of his history. Its success was instantaneous and substantial. Gibbon entered Parliament and was made a commissioner of trade and plantations. He continued with his writing, but much later in life retired to Lausanne for the sake of his health.

For many years he had suffered from a hydrocele, complicated perhaps by an inguinal hernia, although the well-known portrait by Romney painted at this time shows no signs of the extreme corpulence that was to increase so rapidly during the last few years of his life. During these last years he spent most of his time in the library of his villa in Switzerland, conversing with his friends and attended by his doctors, who removed quarts of fluid from the hydrocele to ease the painful symptoms, and gave their patient prescriptions and advice which he always ignored. And meantime he wrote, every night and far into the night

composing the carefully measured prose and poetic descriptions that have made his *Decline and Fall* the greatest of historical works in the English language.

At last it was finished. "I have presumed to mark the moment of conception," he wrote in his *Autobiography*. "I shall now commemorate the hour of my final deliverance. It was on the day, or rather night, of the 27th of June, 1787, between the hours of eleven and twelve, that I wrote the last lines of the 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."

Gibbon knew that the success of his history would ensure the perpetuation of his name and he returned to England in the

summer of 1793, but was to die six months later of septic peritonitis. The man was gone, but the Roman chariots and the Christian martyrs remain, to be enjoyed by scholars and readers alike, a permanent monument for those who appreciate the power and the flexibility of their native language.

But what of Gibbon the man? Both my wife and I feel sorry for him, as we imagine him stranded on his terrace at Lausanne, unable to rise, refused by the imperious beauty to whom he had proposed marriage, a prey to the insolent laughter of his servants. But in showing up his weakness, the incident adds a comic touch to this rather pompous little man and makes him human. "Maybe he was well out of it," said my wife tenderly, as she laid down the last of his volumes, "I expect she had a vile temper."

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Belshazzar's Feast

Whenever I heard William Walton's oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast* I used to be transported back to student days in London during the war and concerts at the Albert Hall. So intense was my first acquaintance with it that, instead of going for the usual drink after the concert, I hurried back to my digs and began writing a pompous and emotional article on the Rebirth of the English Choral Tradition. In the last few years Walton's masterpiece has stirred different emotions.

On a hot day in April with the temperature in the 80s we drove through interminable desert, uninhabited except for the occasional troop of camels or flock of Biblical sheep. The monotonous landscape was sometimes interrupted by a cluster of mud-brick buildings, from which we might catch, if we were lucky, the bright gleam of a peasant dress. Eventually we came to signs of more opulent occupation in the form of a large white rest house, with adjoining iron gates. Through these on foot we negotiated a roadway which dipped underground and was lined with high brick walls into which had been incorporated mythological feline figures. We clambered over piles of rubble, trying to make sense of the scene, and climbed a mound to be greeted by a fringe of palms offering shade from the infernal sun. Descending towards them we found ourselves on a flat rectangle of thin grass surrounded on all sides by a foot-high wall of ancient bricks. As I caught sight of the notice in one corner, my mind was suddenly filled with those fateful words:

Belshazzar the King made a great feast . . .
And in the same hour . . . came forth the
fingers of a man's hand and the King saw the part
of the hand that wrote.
And this was the writing that was written:
Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsim . . .
In that night was Belshazzar the King slain.

Now, whenever I hear the music, my thoughts fly instantly to the time when I stood in the Great Hall of Nebuchadnezzar's palace at Babylon.
—ALEX PATON (consultant physician, Birmingham).

Teruel

Spaniards are nice people. Within five minutes of chugging to a halt with a broken petrol pump on an apparently deserted road 40 km south of Teruel, a Vivaldi-playing non-English-speaking Spaniard was taking half the party to that sunny noon-quiet town. There a spare parts man with a crying baby patiently unravelled our story and had us taxied to Senor Aguilo's garage. Within three hours we had been towed safely in. Europ Assistance authorised our stay in the Hotel Christina and found a replacement "piece" in Vitoria, but it was five days before it came on the daily 3 pm train from Zaragoza—to a rapturous welcome from Senor Aguilo, his staff, and ourselves. By then we owed Senor Alcaide's hotel a lot of money, but he arranged for this to be paid by the Madrid office of Europ Assistance. Last year we took out no touring insurance—we must have been mad.

Teruel, capital of lower Aragon and of its own dry wild province, boasts four towers in the Mudejar style and a cathedral replete with lovely ceramic ornamentation by the Muslims, who remained after the Christians reconquered Spain. The central plaza is triangular, sloping and surrounded by narrow streets and rococo houses, which miraculously survived recurrent attacks by Republicans and Nationalists in the winter of 1937. Even more remarkable is the dry mediaeval hillside town of Albarracin, 37 km away (by hired car trustingly supplied by Senor Milla for a total of £27 for two days), with its prehistoric cave paintings and a Roman footbridge nearby.

Thus in five days of worry about whether we should ever leave under our own steam, an impressive part of Spain's history and geography was unexpectedly revealed. But the real revelation was the patient kindness and courtesy shown to ignorant and almost inarticulate foreigners by all sorts of busy people. These are not virtues of the 1970s and I worry lest foreigners to our shores receive less from us, particularly if they speak as little English as we did Spanish.—W F WHIMSTER (senior lecturer in morbid anatomy, London).

Emergency recall

Each spring, in late April, we welcome back our housemartins from Africa. We wave to them as they circle the house and they look at their old nest and decide if it can be repaired, or whether a new one needs to be built, and then go off for a honeymoon. In three or four weeks they return to the serious business of raising one or two families. Their twittering, like running water outside our bedroom, is music to our ears but the mess they leave on the windowsill is unsightly, and possibly allergenic.

I was reading the journals one Saturday afternoon in the library at the hospital when my bleep went. Some keen GP wants a domiciliary visit on Saturday afternoon I thought, but no, it was a frantic telephone call from home to come at once. The nest outside our bedroom had been accidentally damaged in trying to clean the mess off the window-sill. The young birds had left the nest. Two of them, the older pair, were flying well; the two of the younger brood, hardly able to fly, had miraculously landed in the garden unhurt and were crouching in the bushes. A call to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds brought a grim taperecorded message, saying that they were not interested in problems with individual birds but they might consider acting if a large population were seriously threatened, and a certain number might be rung for help under these circumstances.

I tried to repair the nest, but damaged it even further so that it became unusable. We caught the nestlings and put them in a nest made two years ago, now inhabited by sparrows, and wondered if they would survive the night. Their plaintive cries alerted their parents, who must have fed them, for in the morning they were still alive, and—even more amazing—there were now three birds in the nest, where we had placed only two. One of the older brood had joined them. The parents must have forgiven us for they quickly built up a third nest outside our bedroom window and in some way transferred the babies into this nest. They must have been able to fly by the time they moved. We now have six housemartins flying round our bedroom once more, and we shall not try to clear up their mess again.
—G S CROCKETT (consultant physician, Kettering).