
In this important book David Womersley traces Gibbon’s reputation from the publication of the first edition of the *Decline and Fall* in 1776 to the second edition of the posthumous *Miscellaneous Works*, edited by Gibbon’s friend and executor Lord Sheffield, in 1814-15. Womersley works with a broad canvas, which he fills in with detail minutely researched and persuasively and eloquently put. Discussion moves from what Gibbon’s critics wrote about his life and scholarship, and what Gibbon himself wrote and his scholarship betrayed, to the influence Lord Sheffield exercised over Gibbon’s reputation during his life and, especially, after his death. A series of appendices concludes the study, three of which include extracts from Gibbon’s ‘Memoirs of my Life’, vital for following the thread of chapters seven and eight.

Gibbon was neither ignorant of nor uninterested in his critics’ reaction to his work; nor did Gibbon’s critics rest content with their own and Gibbon’s efforts. A major theme of this study is collaboration, the shared authorship that came about through the critical engagement of Gibbon and his readers, and the positive impact that engagement had on the scholarship of those involved; for example, attacks on the first volume of the *Decline and Fall* inspired Gibbon subsequently to a ‘renewed imaginative and critical engagement’ with his work (108), one result of which were the sophisticated interconnected portraits of Athanasius and Julian (ch. 3). Literary, historiographical, religious, and polemical traditions also influenced the tactics of Gibbon and his critics, and here Womersley illustrates well the background provided to Gibbon’s *Vindication* (1779) by the ‘Ancients and Moderns’ debate and shows how Bentley was an important figure for both Gibbon and his critics, with each side trying to assume his mantle (ch. 2). The political, religious, and cultural issues of the day also made their presence strongly felt. For example past and present debates about the University of Oxford influenced Gibbon’s treatment of his time there (ch. 8). In particular the French Revolution stimulated the commencement and influenced the abandonment of the *Antiquities of the House of Brunswick* (ch. 5), and it created tensions for Gibbon, who was influenced in the 1790s by Burke’s *Reflections*, in his conceptualisation
of his earlier life and intellectual allegiances in the ‘Memoirs’, which in turn affected Sheffield’s handling of his autobiographical material after Gibbon’s death (chs. 6, 9).

The first chapter may serve as an illustration of Womersley’s method. When the first volume of the Decline and Fall appeared in February 1776, how did Gibbon expect critics to react to chapters fifteen and sixteen on Christianity? In his Vindication Gibbon claimed that at the time of publication he expected that the clergy (whom he dubs ‘the Watchmen of the Holy City’, 17) would be outraged, but that he responded to critical attacks only when his honour as a gentleman was impugned (16-17). On the other hand, in draft ‘E’ of his ‘Memoirs’ (completed 1791) Gibbon claimed that he was surprised at the controversy his work stirred up (17). Which, if either, version is correct? Here the revisions to the first volume become relevant. In March 1776 Gibbon observed in a letter to his stepmother that volume one had been well received by the public, but had caused offence amongst the clergy. Yet he did not yet know how their attacks would manifest themselves (16). In this period of uncertainty (March–June 1776), motivated by a fear that such attacks would ‘hurt’ him (27), Gibbon undertook minor revisions for a second edition (publ. 3 June 1776). These supported his assertions with fresh evidence where necessary, and removed sceptical expressions inessential to the main lines of the argument and language that could link him with deism or freethought (19-20). When the critical attacks came, Gibbon was unimpressed with them and his initial ‘apprehension... petrified into scorn’ (29). For the third edition (publ. May 1777) his revisal tone therefore changed. Whilst he conceded that his critics had scored hits (30-1) he generally went on the offensive, especially in his footnotes (29-30, 32-4), and allowed more prominence to his hostility to Christianity (34-7). Womersley’s pattern of Gibbon’s revision is subtle and convincing. His analysis suggests a more complicated picture of the reception of the Decline and Fall than Gibbon would have contemporaries and posterity believe. Against the Vindication Gibbon’s revisions show him ‘anticipating, eluding, and rejecting his adversaries on points of religious history’ (18); and draft ‘E’ of the ‘Memoirs’ is also misleading in that Gibbon’s revisions for the second edition, made before he was familiar with any critical attacks, betray a sense of which areas of his history would offend, and why (18). Gibbon thus seems to
have seen the furore coming. On this issue Womersley is less convincing when, following the lead of some of Gibbon’s contemporaries (41), he conjectures that, in his desire for literary celebrity, Gibbon laced his chapters on Christianity in the first edition ‘with some sophisticated, but inessential, irreligious and deistical language; by means of this allurement the fashionable infidel world might be persuaded to traverse his large Quarto’ (39). The language is indeed there, but was Gibbon doing it deliberately? It cannot be proved so (cf. 41), and if Gibbon did indeed embellish his language to appeal to fashionable society he seems to have been less concerned with his success in that appeal than with the offence he might cause the clergy: it was on this issue that he took the advice of friends (40; cf. 18 n. 16), and his concern is borne out by the revisions he made for the second edition. That suggests where his preoccupations lay, and they were not with fashionable society. Most probably Gibbon wrote those chapters as he saw fit. He considered that his strong and unorthodox opinions, mingled with his cutting and sarcastic style, might cause him trouble in some quarters, and having been reassured by friends he went ahead with publication. His concerns, however, were well placed: including such language had been an ‘error’ (40) – but one of style, not of strategy.

Elsewhere also one might sometimes disagree with Womersley. Gibbon’s footnote on the Gnostics in the first edition of volume one does not risk being read as containing Gibbon’s, rather than the Gnostics’, opinions on Jehovah (20-1). And whatever Gibbon’s renewed confidence in handling religious controversy after the appearance of the second edition of volume one, the revision of the conversion of Constantine for the third edition was probably influenced by his concomitant work on the opening chapters of volume two (which would treat the subject at length) – not the other way round, as Womersley suggests (37). Further, when Henry Davis remarks in his Examination (1778) that ‘Mr Gibbon is equally expert in misrepresenting a modern as an ancient writer’ he is not ‘chiding Gibbon for taking a modern for an ancient writer’, as Womersley reads it (85), but claiming that Gibbon misrepresents equally both modern and ancient writers.

But minutiae should not detract from Womersley’s achievement. His mastery of bibliographical and textual detail (cf 8-9) is impressive
and in the rigour of his methodology he has set a very high standard for future Gibbonian scholarship.

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