

Gibbon, Edward (1737-1794)

Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is one of the greatest works and of the 18th-century Enlightenment and a landmark in historical writing. Its thesis that the introduction of Christianity was the cause of Rome's decline was immediately controversial, but did not stop it from being widely read and admired. Today it is still admired for Gibbon's research and learning and his powerful, balanced prose style. But his much shorter *Autobiography* is now far more approachable.

Even so, it too may appear forbidding. It has many long footnotes, some of which are in Latin or French; and roughly the last third of it is made up of letters by Gibbon to Lord Sheffield, his friend and literary executor. How can a reader today deal with this baroque text of a very upperclass English gentleman? For that matter, why should a reader today want to?

But the title, the *Autobiography of Edward Gibbon*, was not his. Gibbon himself called his manuscript not an autobiography but his "Memoirs of My Life and Writings." It was Sheffield who added many of the long footnotes and over a hundred pages of letters and an account of "Gibbon's Last Days," and then supplied the new title, when publishing it 1795, more than a year after Gibbon's death in January, 1794. And it was a new title in two senses, for at that time the very word "autobiography" had barely entered the English language. The older word "memoir" was in many ways simpler and more specific. With its connection to the word "memory" it generally was of a life or work or event or journey and not to be confused with a whole life or life story. The "autobiography" was the rather pretentious new kind of "biography" (life-writing) that was "self-life-writing." Since then "autobiography" has usually been defined as something longer, more comprehensive and complex. This distinction, although not absolute, can be said to have begun right here, with Lord Sheffield's incorporation of Gibbon's shorter, more direct memoir into a longer, more complicated and varied autobiography.

So the first way to make Gibbon less forbidding is to focus first on his Memoirs and not to be distracted by the long footnotes and letters added by Lord Sheffield. The second is to try to accept the three standards that he sets for himself in the opening paragraph: one, that "Truth, naked, unblushing truth...must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative"; two, that the "style shall be simple and familiar"; and three, that "my own amusement is my motive." By both accepting these points and also going on to ask what Gibbon meant by them, reading his Memoirs can become a delightful and instructive experience.

An example of his telling the "naked, unblushing proof" is fulfilled in his story of how he became a pleasure-seeking playboy while at Oxford and also "bewildered myself in the errors of the Church of Rome." (p. 46) This so shocked his father that he was sent to Lausanne, Switzerland—the center of Calvinism—for the next five years to complete his education. There he again shocked his father by falling in love with Susan Curchod, the bright and virtuous daughter of a minister. "The report of such a prodigy awakened my curiosity; I saw and loved," Gibbon writes. But his father "would not hear of this strange alliance, and...without his consent I was myself destitute and helpless." This leads to one of the most quoted sentences in the book and one that is a good example of how "style is the image of character." "After a painful struggle I yielded to my fate: I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son." (pp. 83-4) It is not a long and complex sentence, like many of Gibbon's. But by opposing the two images of himself—"a lover" and "a son" and linking the one with romance ("sighed") and the other with duty ("obeyed") he clearly illustrates his character. There is also something very self-consciously operatic in this man and his language, in his style. Although the Memoirs are professedly a review of "the simple transactions of a private and literary life," (p. 1), he nevertheless loves to strike poses and call attention to himself.

This could be what Gibbon really meant when he wrote that "My own amusement is my motive, and will be my reward." He did not, like Boswell, write as part of his education and self-improvement. He was not a young man. He was a world-famous historian who was enjoying the fruits of his achievement, some of which were fame itself. So he performed, not just to "some discreet and indulgent friends" but to the whole educated world.

Recognizing this quality of Gibbon's book may lead us to think further about the possible differences

between memoir and autobiography. Maybe memoirs are not simpler and more modest. Maybe Gibbon only chose the word because his readers would think so, thus allowing him to play the role of the private writer and then stun us by frequently breaking out of it, to become a grand public figure. If so, then Lord Sheffield was quite justified in adding more material and adding the new, somewhat more pretentious title: *The Autobiography of Edward Gibbon*.

Questions for Further Study:

1. The 18th-century is often called “the age of reason,” because of its opposition to superstition and ignorance and emphasis on science and learning. How does Gibbon embody such enlightenment? How does he not?
2. Imagine a conversation between Gibbon and Boswell. How are their books similar and different? What would they like and not like about each other? Whom do *you* like more?
3. At the end of his memoirs Gibbon expressed his gratitude for having “drawn a high prize in the lottery of life.” (See pp. 217-8) Is this offensively self-satisfied, or is it something that a fortunate, successful man like him should say?
4. Compare and contrast the autobiographies of Margery Kempe and John Bunyan, focusing on their religious experiences, their reasons for recording their experiences, and the effects of her dictating her story and his writing it himself. What are the additional differences resulting from difference in sex and literacy?
5. Contrast Boswell’s *Journal* and Gibbon’s *Memoirs*. Which is the more “enlightened” document? How different were their uses of their books?
6. As noted before, Bunyan and Pepys were close contemporaries. How do you account for the great differences between them and between their books? Which man is more sympathetic. Is a religious conversion narrative or a diary more intrinsically sympathetic?