

Edward Gibbon

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EDWARD GIBBON.

It has been said that much of Switzerland's contribution to the Culture of Europe is due to foreigners. This assertion, whilst open to argument, cannot be denied in the case of Edward Gibbon for it is during his long residence in Lausanne that the greater part of his "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" was written.

This monumental work has established Gibbon's fame as, possibly, the greatest of modern historians. It is an immense canvas of Roman and Byzantine History, teeming with an amazing wealth of detail and unsurpassed in beauty of style. Its length and size has probably deterred many from reading it and give point to Bagehot's malicious remark that it is a work to be looked at on the book-shelf and not to be read. A much more readable book is Gibbon's Autobiography from which, by the way, this sketch is partly documented.

Edward Gibbon was born 27th April, 1737. His family possessed considerable means and were able therefore, to give him a careful education, private tutor, public school and so forth. At the age of fifteen he was sent to Oxford University. There, as the result of much study, he decided to join the Roman Catholic Church. His conversion was perfectly genuine but purely intellectual. As Augustine Birrell, in his *Obiter Dicta* puts it "without priestly aid, he read himself in the Church of Rome, was baptized by a Jesuit father in June 1753 and by Christmas 1754 had read himself out again." His father, however, was greatly incensed and promptly packed the boy off to Lausanne where, during five years, he lived in the house of a Calvinist pastor. He returned to London in 1758, more Swiss than English, and three years later his first book, in French, was published. He then set out on a tour through Europe. It was during these travels, and at the sight of the ruins of the Capitol in Rome, that he conceived the idea of writing his great History, a task to which he devoted the rest

of his life. In 1776 the first volume of the "Decline and Fall" was published and met with immediate success.

Gibbon subsequently entered Parliament and served for a while in the militia. In 1783 he resigned his seat and joined his friend Deyverdun in Lausanne where he took up permanent residence.

His daily life in Lausanne was one of much reading and unceasing industry. The natural beauty of Switzerland seems to have made little impression on him. He hated Exercise and it is doubtful whether he ever climbed a mountain. His one all-absorbing interest lay in his History the last volume of which appeared in 1788.

He never married, but in his twentieth year he fell in love with a Mlle Churchod, proposed, and was accepted. His father forbade the marriage and young Gibbon, with an eye, probably, to his patrimony, tamely submitted and broke off the engagement. Badly as he behaved in this affair, Mlle Churchod forgave him and he was a frequent visitor to her Salon in later years. She afterwards married Mr. Necker, a banker and the future Finance-Minister to Louis XVI of France, and became the mother of the celebrated Mme de Stael.

In appearance, Gibbon was unprepossessing. Sir Joshua Reynold, in his well-known portrait, did his best to idealize those somewhat unattractive features which are redeemed, however, from the commonplace by a fine and lofty forehead.

He died in 1794 during a visit to London and lies buried in Fletching, Sussex. —

Whatever views posterity may hold on Gibbon the man, his authority as a historian is firmly established and nothing can dim his fame as a writer of magnificent English prose.

As for the town of Lausanne whose honoured guest he was for fifteen years, she may well be proud of her association with this remarkable Englishman.

J.J.F.S.



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