

The Genius of Gibbon.¹

BY THE REV. A. H. T. CLARKE, M.A.

ON November 15, 1894, was celebrated in London the Gibbon centenary. Just one hundred years before, in the month of January, had the great historian passed away. Before dying he bequeathed to the first Lord Sheffield, whose house and family he had come to regard almost as his own, and whose private vault was destined to be his own last resting-place, a bundle of precious manuscripts. Before long, in progressive instalments, and under the title of "Gibbon's Miscellaneous Works," they were given to the world. On no editor could Gibbon's choice have more happily fallen.

At the recent festival held in honour of Gibbon, the present Earl Sheffield, grandson to Gibbon's friend, was by acclamation elected into the presidential chair. He courteously acceded to the request that more of the family heirlooms should see the light. It was decided to publish for the first time *in extenso* the celebrated "Memoirs of my Life and Writings," long acknowledged by the best judges to be the first of that species of autobiographical composition in the world.

The originals of these consist of some seven separate sketches, written at different times, in different tones, of unequal lengths, each in turn repeating, modifying, or supplementing the other. It had been the task of the first Lord Sheffield, with the help of his elegant and accomplished daughter (Gibbon's "blooming Maria" and the future Lady Stanley), to weave into one seamless whole, by the art of happy selection, these discordant and discontinuous purple patches. The present editor's task was more simple. He had merely to print straight on end the several manuscripts, distinguishing by means of footnotes all variations from the original text and by square brackets all the newer matter; yet some forty errors may be noted!

¹ 1. The Gibbon MSS. (British Museum). 2. "The Autobiography of Edward Gibbon." From unpublished MSS. With Introduction by Earl Sheffield. London: John Murray, 1897. 3. "Private Letters of Edward Gibbon, 1753-1794." Edited by R. E. Prothero. In two volumes. *Ibid.* 1897.

In one of his delightful letters (ii. 192) Gibbon has remarked that our virtues are closely connected with our failings. This shrewd observation receives a curious illustration in the present instance. Having entirely neglected the higher matters of the law of editorship—viz., accuracy, industry, and judgment—our editor contrives to tithe the mint, anise, and cummin of the text with almost superstitious scrupulosity. His sense of truth becomes, indeed, almost painful. Everywhere does this perverted taste for a vicious accuracy salute us. The whole work is, in short, a facsimile in print. Whenever Gibbon writes “I” for “the,” or “I” for “and”—and “I” was this great egotist’s chief clerical slip—it is duly recorded. We wonder Lady Maria’s pencillings, or the changes of tone in the inks Gibbon successively used, were not recorded also. At any rate, the public is now well “assured” that “*every* piece contained in this volume is now printed *exactly* as Gibbon wrote it.”

We turn with pleasure from such solemn futilities to the task before us—a task agreeably lightened by Gibbon’s constant habit, recorded in his letters (i. 2), of noting the progress of his studies and the movements of his mind. We propose to sketch, from the entire Gibbon literature, the story of Gibbon in the making.

The Father of History has finely observed that, as no country can be entirely *αὐτάρκης* (self-resourceful), we must allow this title to that country which combines most of the resources of other countries in herself. “So also is it the case with man.” This happy simile was never truer than of Gibbon. He seems to unite in himself every species of intellectual excellence. His History alone is a monument of German thoroughness, of French lucidity, of English judgment. This last, indeed, was perhaps his happiest gift. Thirteen centuries of human life, embracing all the nations of Europe, pass before us in this panoramic survey. His is the broadest canvas of any historian since Herodotus. Yet nothing escapes him. He turns aside to notice and to correct a flaw in his author’s text. He is alternately scientist, artist, chemist, naturalist, metaphysician. He is the only secular historian we know that is (so far as he

goes) an accurate theologian. In Germany he has become the text-book on Roman jurisprudence. Everywhere, as Wellington said of Napoleon, his elephantine proboscis appears, tapping and sounding the ground on which he treads. It can with equal ease lift logs and pick up a pin.

His universal erudition drowned Lord Acton ; it floats Gibbon. And, like every really great man, Gibbon not only rides the ocean but commands the elements, or turns them to his own account. The tide of time, which has during the last hundred years swept down all lesser craft upon the waters, has left Gibbon's standing entire. The caulkers have, indeed, been about it, the carpenters and the plumbers and the canvasmakers—Milman and Guizot, Wenck and Neander, Smith and Bury. But their most prying search and patient pains have served but to strengthen a stay or splice a yard.

The child is father to the man. Gibbon early displayed "a blind propensity for books" (Memoir B). By eleven or twelve he was "well acquainted" with Homer and Virgil, Ovid and the "Arabian Nights," in English dress. One day he espied the door of his grandfather's library ajar. The young eagle hastened to the prey, and there, in the seclusion of study, winged his flight over "all ages and nations, and voyages and travels into every country of the globe" (C).

From his three schools, Putney, Kingston-on-Thames, and Westminster, his genius and his sickness left him little to learn. "Reading, free, desultory reading," such as that which nourished the early youth of Scott and Johnson, formed the sole employment of his solitary hours at home.

But Gibbon was no mere intellectual epicure. If he read without conscious method, yet he read, all unknown to himself, in the light of a great purpose. Like Scott and Johnson, he was laying, in the spirit of Herodotus' *ἀντάρκης ἀνὴρ*, the foundation of his future studies. "All men of genius," says Froude, "are men of instinct ; they follow where instinct leads them." The strange thing in Gibbon's case is the directness with which

that instinct led him to the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

“ My indiscriminate appetite subsided by degrees in the *historic* line. Some *instinct* of criticism directed me to the genuine sources. Before I was sixteen I was master of all the English materials I have since employed in the chapters of the Persians and Arabians, the Tartars and the Turks ” (B, F.).

But the vagaries of instinct alone cannot make the scholar. Hitherto Gibbon's knowledge had become, what his great-cousin Lord Acton's ever remained, *rudis indigestaque moles*. Gibbon determined to repair the error. The maps and tables of the foremost chronologers were accurately surveyed—Cellarius and Stranchius, Ussher and Prideaux, Helvicus and Anderson. In his childish balance he presumed to weigh the systems of Scaliger and Petavius, of Marsham and Newton ; and his sleep was sometimes disturbed by the difficulty of reconciling the LXX with the Hebrew computation.

At fifteen Gibbon found himself at Oxford. His famous sarcasms, if tinctured with gall, were pointed with truth. They were true of all the University training of those bad old times. No visitor to Oxford will deny to her the praise of combining, like Athens, hospitality with taste and learning with leisure. But Athens never became the Alexandria of the learned world. And Oxford has left to her humbler rival the task of rearing those tome-eating giants who, in Gibbon's phrase, “devour and digest whole libraries” (*Misc. Wks.*, iii. 571). To Oxford belongs the praise of diffusing *culture*, by editing, as Hooker edited Calvin, and reproducing, as Dean Stanley reproduced Ewald, the broad general knowledge of the age. From the recluse mind of the pioneer scholar, from the Bentleys and Newtons, from the Miltons and Erasmuses, from the Bucers and Barrows, her genius, eminently conservative, formal and refined, is averse. To Oxford in an evil hour, on April 3, 1752, Gibbon hied :

“ I arrived at Oxford with a stock of erudition that might have puzzled a doctor, and a degree of ignorance of which a schoolboy would have been ashamed.”

The doctors were indeed puzzled, and here was one of the

first instalments of Macaulay's schoolboy. Not since (some twenty years before) Samuel Johnson had hustled the tutors of Pembroke had such a portent of ill-regulated erudition appeared in Oxford. A young man in a new society, ignorant of the ways of the world, and only dimly conscious of possessing superior abilities, is rarely modest; and modesty was never one even of the last infirmities of Gibbon's noble mind.

"To the University of Oxford I acknowledge no obligation, and she will as cheerfully renounce me for a son as I am willing to disclaim her for a mother. *The reader will pronounce between the school and the scholar.*"

"Sir," asked one of Johnson, in defence of the Methodists exiled from Oxford, "why cannot we regard them as harmless and useful?" "A cow, sir," replied Johnson, "is a harmless and useful animal, but we don't keep her in our *gardens*." Here was not merely a cow, but a veritable bull of Bashan torn from his native pastures and the forest walks of ancient learning, and suddenly let loose on the trim lawns and prim paddocks of Magdalen College. After fifteen months of independent roving the young wild-bull was caught and turned to grass on the mountains of Switzerland. It was in the meshes of the Papal net he had become entangled.

Since the days of Chrysostom (French, *Miracles*, p. 53, note) the championship of post-Apostolic miracles has been difficult. In Gibbon's day Dr. Middleton, the learned author of Cicero's Life, had made it impossible. The "Free Inquiry" was banned by the authorities. Gibbon's curiosity at once led him to open it. With characteristic thoroughness he pursued the search. His logical mind noted that the same three centuries that produced the miracles produced the leading tenets of Popery also. His mind seemed to oscillate—like Newman's at a later day—between the Scylla and Charybdis of sheer atheism and Roman Catholicism. Bossuet completed the revolution begun, and the Church of Rome claimed the first of her long list of victims from Oxford. To us who belong to the Church of a better day, and one that has grown up in the faith of Christ under the shadow of Meyer and Neander, such arguments as these seem

incredibly gross as reasons for forsaking the genius of the New Testament for the forgeries of a medieval superstition. Yet how can we sufficiently admire the manly independence of Gibbon's character, which procured from an angered parent his instant removal to Lausanne? We view with like admiration his escape from the logical subtleties (or rather fallacious sophistries) of the Papal position. He noted, with Luther, that the Mass was the keystone of the Papal arch upon which the entire medieval fabric rested. When this gave way, the rest of the articles of the Romish Creed "disappeared like a dream."

The banishment to Lausanne exceeded Gibbon's best wishes. "Such as I am," he afterward exclaimed, "in genius or learning, I owe to Lausanne. It was in that school that the statue was discovered in the block of marble" (B). It was in that school that he laid the foundations of his European fame. Four plays dryly interpreted were all that he ever did at Oxford. Gibbon therefore bent himself to recover his classics. Behold the *αὐτάρκης ἀνὴρ* at work! His Swiss tutor, soon out-distanced by his pupil, "wisely left him to his own *genius*." By dint of early rising—at four in summer, in winter at eight—he secured some ten to twelve hours a day for study, and in eight months "completely mastered" French and Latin. In twenty-seven more months, practising the habit of retranslations, he reviewed with minute care, and even in some cases with repeated perusal, almost the entire Latin classics! From Latin he leapt to Greek. "Contrary to Leclerc's advice," he started with Homer, armed with Pope and a Latin Strabo. A round of Homeric studies that touched every point of Greek manners, art, gymnastics, pottery and even pronunciation, as well as a Greek Life of Homer, branched out into a well-arranged series of essays and commonplace books. Next the Port Royal Greek Grammar explained the Homeric syntax. "Contrary to the general method," his native good sense taught him to begin with the verb, as that part of speech best describes the operations of the mind. In the course of his march through this thorny jungle he diverted himself by reading the works of Erasmus,

of whose character he has left us a lively and accurate sketch (*cf. esp. Misc. Wks., v. 243 et seq.*).

Gibbon admitted that in Greek at any rate he never attained "the scrupulous ear of a well-flogged critic." Yet he fulfilled Macaulay's definition of a scholar—the man who can read Plato with his feet on the fender. His Latin knowledge enabled him at nineteen to correspond on familiar terms with the Continental scholars, and at thirty-three to overthrow the great Warburton's hypothesis of the sixth *Æneid*. Meanwhile lectures on chemistry and the mathematics he attended with equal profit and delight.

It had ever been Gibbon's great ambition to become "a citizen of the world." This he accomplished in four ways :

1. He decided to travel. Ere long, by exhausting every source of information from Nardini's "Rome" to maps and medals, he carried in his head a perfect chart of the whole Italian peninsula. For the arts (except the Venus of Medici) and for music he had little taste. But "the Eternal City" entirely captivated his historical imagination. He noted the happy blend of Catholic and pagan antiquities ; and the sound of the vesper-bell in Jupiter's temple on the old Capitol gave birth to the immortal history.

2. Gibbon had yet to acquire the tastes of an English gentleman. On his return home after this trip he recovered the use of his native tongue by the assiduous perusal of Hume and Robertson, Addison and Swift. But it was to the Hampshire Militia, and to a seat in Parliament as well as on the Board of Trade, that he was indebted for a full view of English society.

3. Good manners he had always studied and lastingly acquired. The salons of Paris and London recall the pompous little figure of 56 inches high, in flowered velvet coat with bag and sword, rapping his snuff-box as he smirked and smiled, while he rounded his periods with the air of a man of great good-breeding. Of conversation he was more fond (if possible) than of books, and his own conversation excelled even his writing. He loved the society of women ; but perhaps on

Disraeli's principle: "I prefer," said Lord Beaconsfield, "men's company to that of women in general; but a first-rate woman I prefer to a first-rate man any day."

4. One such first-rate woman had early appeared to claim Gibbon's hand. But Gibbon's heartless selfishness preferred his library of six or seven thousand volumes, which he called his seraglio (E). Yet he was always in the toils; and to the last he seemed to regret the loss of married life. With his first love, who became the wife of the celebrated M. Necker, he still corresponded with affectionate familiarity. Few more thoroughly understood or praised with more discernment his learned genius; and from few (not excepting Porson himself) did his reflections on Christianity receive more unsparing rebuke. "Pourquoi," she asks, "l'homme de génie, qui fait son dieu de la gloire et qui croit vivre éternellement dans son sein, veut-il ôter la même espérance à ceux qui mettent leur vertu à la place de cette gloire?" (*Misc. Wks.*, ii., 179).

But of that immortal history, and of that not less immortal attack upon the Christian revelation, it was not ours here to have spoken. We hope to assume that grateful task at a later opportunity.



Was St. Paul Right in taking his Last Journey to Jerusalem?

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WE are so accustomed to look upon St. Paul as being almost always infallible, that this question seems almost an impertinence. And at the least it might be looked upon as dragging him down from the high pedestal on which, by general consent of Christians, he has been placed. But we have to remember that the only really infallible One is the Lord Jesus Christ, and that it was certainly within the bounds of possibility that St. Paul should mistake his own earnest desire and determination for the guidance of the Holy Ghost. We