← Essays

# Edward Gibbon’s empire

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THEMES: **CLASSICS, HISTORY**

Edward Gibbon’s 'The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' was published 250 years ago. Its arguments remain as pertinent as ever.

*Marco Ricci and Sebastiano Ricci's 'Landscape with Classical Ruins and Figures'. Credit: Jimlop collection*

'Diligence and accuracy are the only merits which an historical writer may ascribe to himself', wrote Edward Gibbon on 1 February 1776, in the first preface of his life's pre-eminent work, 'if any merit, indeed, can be assumed from the performance of an indispensable duty.' Every true historian wants to write about a grand historical narrative, something that remains timeless. History as an academic discipline, however, is too narrow and often ideological, and, as both recent historical research and products out of the university presses suggest, it is no longer interested in thematic grand narratives. It does not see itself as a guiding discipline for the ruling class, being ideologically opposed for about a hundred years to the very concept of a 'ruling class' itself. In some ways, that could be a good thing. Theodor Mommsen, the German classicist, made his achievements outside the stifling confines of academia, as did Gibbon himself.

There are many more such examples. Grand Strategy, itself a subfield of International Relations and History, evolved in 1930s Britain – EH Carr's *The Twenty Years Crisis* is often considered the first such category-defying treatise – and perfected itself in post-Second World War America. There it produced some of the greatest scholar-practitioners of the last century, from Hans Morgenthau to Henry Kissinger, who blended detached history, elite diplomacy and an enduring, timeless sense of tragedy. In Kissinger's own words: 'Every civilization that has ever existed has ultimately collapsed. History is a tale of efforts that failed, or aspirations that weren't realized. So, as a historian, one has to live with a sense of the inevitability of tragedy.'

The reason was simple. Diplomacy, historically, has been an elite and aristocratic vocation, taught in parts, equally by historical erudition and observable interactions among peers. A mix of abstract philosophy and expansive narrative, found in political science or philosophy. The aim was to identify timeless historical patterns or narratives, not in-depth area studies with primary sources; its purpose was to provide prudential guidance, rather than promote activism. It was thus designed to be history without being history: to teach statecraft to those who are not from patrician stock and thus uninitiated in hierarchical subtleties, and to help them see timeless patterns from history, in a republic that did not guarantee diplomatic positions to any such official senatorial or patrician class based on bloodlines, and disavowed aristocracy as a governing principle.

Kissinger's finest piece of historical scholarship remains his doctoral thesis-turned-book, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace*; it is his one true treatise, the subject being the applied realism of Lord Castlereagh and Prince Metternich, and the decades-long great power equilibrium that resulted from the restoration of reactionary order in Europe. It provides valuable lessons for diplomats seeking to learn their craft by reading about the masters.

Edward Gibbon was not a grand-strategist. He was, however, a grand-historian of a different register. Perhaps most importantly, he was also, to use contemporary internet slang, a 'doomer' of his age. In fact, February 1776 was the start of a dark age for grand strategy, at least for those on the British Isles. Across the ocean, rumblings of rebellion detached the 'civilisation' that was supposed to be an ally, proving once again that kinship or culture doesn't always result in solidarity or alliances. Across the sea, a great power was actively engaged in competition across the continents: the Anglo-French rivalry was spreading from the Americas to India. The Industrial Revolution resulted in social upheaval and reactionary backlash. Within a couple of decades, a revolutionary peer-power in continental Europe would transform the laws of conquest by replacing dynastic claims with was qualitatively similar to ours, and one can imagine why a British essayist in London would focus his life's definitive work on the decline of the world's foremost, cosmopolitan *urbs aeterna* and her globe-spanning empire. Good history is important, but the timing of a work makes it profound.

Writing a grand historical narrative, whether of an era, an event, or an age, is a calling. It is not 'a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public', as Thucydides wrote at the beginning of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Unlike any other work of history, a grand history can also be of an epochal event that shapes the destiny of a great power permanently: a classic American example of this is Shelby Foote's *Civil War* trilogy. However, it might also be found in studies of personalities, or an order, such as Franz Babinger's *Mehmed the Conqueror and his Time*. Genuine grand historical writings, especially in the style and register that started in the late 18th century, peaked in the 19th, and then declined by the mid-20th, were designed to enhance the understanding of colonial statesmen, diplomats and aristocrats. Sir Jadunath Sarkar's *The Fall of the Mughal Empire*, William Morfill's *A History of Russia*, and Sir Edward Creasy's translation and annotation of Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's *History of the Ottoman Turks* are fine examples of such timeless thematic assessment. Perhaps three of the most important grand-historical works – on English history immediately prior to the First World War, on the causes of the Second World War, and on the final days of the Habsburgs – were written in the last century by AJP Taylor, the last true great master of the genre. Whatever they are, they could often be the work of a lifetime: Gibbon's opus on Rome's rise, decline and fall is arguably the template and a classic of the genre, but it is also incomparable and unrivalled in its scope and exceptionality, of a kind that can only be written from a historical distance of many centuries, extrapolated from detached secondary literatures.

of grand strategy designed to teach and shape imperial officers. ‘The policy of the emperors and the senate, as far as it concerned religion, was happily seconded by the reflections of the enlightened, and by the habits of the superstitious, part of their subjects. The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord’, Gibbon wrote, perhaps a nod to the religious intolerance and challenges to authority stirring in the American colonies. His book is one of the most sustained accounts of Rome’s cosmopolitan imperial order, portraying the Roman Empire at its height as a political entity defined not by ethnicity or origin, but by law, citizenship, and participation in a universal civil order. Rome’s greatness derived precisely from its capacity to transcend ethnic particularism and to incorporate diverse peoples into a shared imperial framework. The eventual erosion of this cosmopolitanism, rather than mere military decay, forms a central strand of his explanation for imperial decline.

Gibbon framed Rome as a universal polity rather than a state: ‘The Roman Empire comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilised portion of mankind.’ This formulation is revealing. Civilisation, for Gibbon, is not a biological attribute, but a condition produced by habits. The empire’s unity rested on the ‘gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners’, which ‘cemented the union of the provinces’. Rome’s authority was therefore not sustained solely by coercion but by the diffusion of a shared legal and administrative culture capable of binding together peoples of radically different languages, customs, and ancestries. ‘The grandsons of the Gauls, who had besieged Julius Caesar in Alesia, commanded legions, governed provinces, and were admitted into the senate of

This Roman identity was ‘diffused through the provinces’. Citizenship functioned as a legal status rather than an ethnic inheritance. Conquered peoples were not merely subjects but potential participants in imperial life, gradually adopting Roman law, language and civic norms. Gibbon explicitly rejects the idea of a rigid divide between conqueror and conquered, stressing instead a process of mutual adaptation in which provincial elites entered Roman institutions while Rome itself became increasingly provincial in composition. ‘The terror of the Roman arms added weight and dignity to the moderation of the emperors. They preserved peace by a constant preparation for war; and while justice regulated their conduct, they announced to the nations on their confines that they were as little disposed to endure, as to offer an injury.’

It was the Roman law and language that played a central role in this integration. Gibbon repeatedly highlights its universal scope, noting that Roman jurisprudence was ‘adapted to the use of all nations and all ranks of men’. Law operated as a common grammar of political life, capable of governing an empire composed of Spaniards, Gauls, Greeks, Syrians, Africans and countless others without privileging any one ethnic group as inherently superior. This legal universalism, in Gibbon’s view, reflected a deeper Roman recognition of rights and obligations. While Roman society was undeniably hierarchical, it was social rather than biological in the modernist sense. ‘Wheresoever the Roman conquers, he inhabits, is a very just observation of Seneca, confirmed by history and experience,’ Gibbon writes.

The army and imperial bureaucracy further embodied this inclusive logic. The ‘bravest and most active spirits of the subject nations’ were drawn into imperial

Roman power rested on participation rather than bloodline. This ideal reaches its apex in Gibbon’s portrait of the Antonine age. Gibbon’s admiration for this era rests on its implicit rejection of ethnic exclusivity. The empire was governed by men drawn from across its territories, ruling in the name of a universal civil mission.

That included a deliberate dilution of Rome’s inherent reactionary impulses as well. ‘It is a just though trite observation, that victorious Rome was herself subdued by the arts of Greece,’ Gibbon wrote. Language was another integrating mechanism. ‘So sensible were the Romans of the influence of language over national manners, that it was their most serious care to extend, with the progress of their arms, the use of the Latin tongue. The ancient dialects of Italy, the Sabine, the Etruscan, and the Venetian, sunk into oblivion.’

This universalising tendency also incorporated the legitimacy that was required in a benevolent empire. Gibbon, more than anyone else, knew how empires needed to satiate the masses, under a veneer of legitimacy and not purely as a consequence of might. It wasn’t always a question of a conflict between a populist Caesar and a Senatorial class. The emperor needed an elite as well. ‘It was on the dignity of the senate that Augustus and his successors founded their new empire; and they affected, on every occasion, to adopt the language and principles of Patricians.’ From the onset, Roman authority was therefore portrayed as institutional rather than personal or dynastic. Emperors were content to promulgate their edicts in the ‘various characters of a Roman magistrate’, emphasising continuity with republican office rather than ethnic kingship. Even as imperial power becomes increasingly absolute, it is still justified in civic terms: ‘the Roman people, by the

Roman cosmopolitanism is further reflected in the empire's procedural treatment of its subjects, including those who stood outside dominant religious or cultural norms. It is difficult now, as it was in Gibbon's own age, to consider how Roman authority was independent of religious solidarity, and was inclusive in its detachment, imposing order over whomever it considered uncivilised and disruptive to the order. An empire which is propositional and credal would require severe reprimand for deviating from that creed.

The Germans during Gibbon's own age were among the finest cultural jewels of Europe. Gibbon writes, on the difference between the Romans and the ancient Germans:

> *The Germans, in the age of Tacitus, were unacquainted with the use of letters; and the use of letters is the principal circumstance that distinguishes a civilised people from a herd of savages incapable of knowledge or reflection: the Germans, in his time, had no cities; and that they affected to despise the works of Roman industry, as places of confinement rather than of security. The magistrates might deliberate and persuade, the people only could resolve and execute; and the resolutions of the Germans were for the most part hasty and violent. Barbarians accustomed to place their freedom in gratifying the present passion, and their courage in overlooking all future consequences, turned away with indignant contempt from the remonstrances of justice and policy, and it was the practice to signify by a hollow murmur their dislike of such timid counsels.*

Germans were at least polytheistic. Early monotheists were especially regarded with suspicion, and were addressed through standardised legal processes rather than collective or racialised punishment. Compliance with the law, rather than assent as might satisfy the mind of a Polytheist; and as soon as they admitted the idea of a future state, they embraced it with the zeal which has always formed the characteristic of the nation.'

The year 1776 saw three literary developments that are still formative to our own understanding of nationhood and imperialism: Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, and Gibbon's opus on Rome. Of that, Gibbon's lessons on empires require further scrutiny, given our own restive imperial times. Throughout *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon's narrative assumes that Roman identity had always been composite and expansive, sustained by education, language, law, and civic participation, and the empire's greatness lay in its ability to transform outsiders into Romans through institutional integration.

The tragedy of Rome was not that it embraced diversity, but that the civic and legal disciplines that once made such cosmopolitan rule possible were gradually eroded by majoritarianism and racial group-thinking. Roman cosmopolitanism was also fragile, and its decline forms a crucial part of his broader argument. Incidentally, it was the rise of monotheism and crusading zeal that introduced the sharp contrast between imperial pluralism and religious exclusivity.

Gibbon was shaped by enlightenment literature and Whig historiography, but he accurately notes that the various pagan cults of the Roman world were regarded as 'equally true' by the people and 'equally useful' by magistrates. This realism allowed diverse communities to co-exist under a single imperial order. Judaism in the provinces, and Christianity in the core, by contrast, asserted an exclusive possession and interpretation of truth, undermining the pluralist foundations of an imperial unity. This departure from a previously cosmopolitan ethos, one that exclusionary forms of allegiances in Europe.

The British imperial officer class at their peak, from Amherst, to Macaulay, to Bentinck, understood and internalised that particular lesson, especially during the Second British Empire and the era of the Raj. The lesson of Rome was that empires grow, sustain and endure not by enforcing homogeneity, but by constructing institutions capable of transcending it. ‘The narrow policy of preserving, without any foreign mixture, the pure blood of the ancient citizens, had checked the fortune, and hastened the ruin, of Athens and Sparta,’ Gibbon wrote. Yet ‘the aspiring genius of Rome sacrificed vanity to ambition, and deemed it more prudent, as well as honourable, to adopt virtue and merit for her own wheresoever they were found, among slaves or strangers, enemies or barbarians’.

Two hundred and fifty years on from Gibbon’s thesis, in an era of imperial, ‘civilisational’ and ethnic politics, this particular lesson on what it means to be civilised as well as strong, is strikingly pertinent once again.

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