

Eötvös Loránd University  
School of English and American Studies  
**Current Trends in British Historiography**

## **First Take Away Test Essay**

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## Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

The unprecedented methodology introduced by Gibbon in his monumental work "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", as well as its underlying pioneering scientific expectations from the historian, have earned him a widely acknowledged status as the precursor of modern historical writing. They have also made any attempt to associate him with, or to distinguish him from, the dominant historiographical school of his time, inherently futile; since as most revolutionaries, he was inevitably and deeply rooted at the same intellectual ground above which he has rose.

On the one hand, Gibbon's accurate, extensive and thorough use of reference material; highly detailed and elaborate notes regarding the relative importance of each of his sources; and innovative refusal to be satisfied with second-hand documents when primary ones were available; all ostensibly mark him as an almost evident prototype of what Butterfield would define more than a century after his demise as "The historical specialist". While the latter's 'older brother', the general historian, is highly susceptible to the "Whig fallacy", the mostly descriptive nature of the historical specialist's focus on particular and concrete occurrences and processes in the past, makes him partially immune to its temptations. From this perspective, Gibbon's magnum opus may be seen as the first step of western thinking in the long path ultimately leading to its liberation from its own circularly subjective reasoning.

On the other hand, it may well be considered another form of Whig fallacy to unconsciously attribute to Gibbon, a distinct scholar from the era of enlightenment, the Post WWI disillusioned atmosphere which led Butterfield and others to a revision of western historiography and the negation of certain features of it, which they named "Whig". It is perhaps only reasonable to suggest that his scientific rigorousness, so exceptional for its time, has contributed, at least indirectly, to the much later development of the above mentioned 'Post-Whigism'. It would, however, contradict the very core of Butterfield's argumentation to induce from Gibbon's dissatisfaction with some of the intellectual habits which are criticized in "The Whig Interpretation of

History" (most notably, the willingness to rely on secondary sources for drawing conclusions unsupported by documents), that he also shared the rest of Butterfield's opinions regarding historiography. Since he lived in a profoundly different historical context than that of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, jumping to such a conclusion would be sheer anachronism. The two polarized answers to the question "was Gibbon as Whig historian", both lack any complex view of the matter discussed, and seem to indicate that it was not the right question to begin with. A refined version of it might be "which aspects in Gibbon's historical writing, if any, are in accord with the so-called 'Whig' form of historiography; and which, if any, differ from or are opposed to it". In order to answer it, one should perhaps examine various characteristics of Gibbon's work in the light of the most commonly accepted characterization of Whig history.

The term 'Whig history' draws from the historical rivalry between the two British political parties, the Whigs - which aspired to increase the power of the parliament, and the Tories - which strived to preserve or to restore the power of the king; a rivalry which lasted from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> one. It was humorously 'borrowed' from the sphere of politics to the one of historiography, where it was used to characterize various forms of a 'voluntarily recruited' (although, often unknowingly) type of history writing, which paints human history in the colors of its own political preferences, which are almost exclusively protestant, liberal and progressive, like the political fraction this sort of history is named after. The so-called 'Whiggish' intellectual hegemony had dominated Britain for approximately two centuries, during which few of the most notably influential versions of English history earned an almost undisputed status, until ultimately being replaced by others (as demonstrated by Rapin's 'reign', which lasted from 1723 until his 'demotion' in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Hume; which remained unchallenged even in the face of prominent figures such as Hallam and Mackintosh, until finally 'overthrown' by Macaulay in 1848). Other influential historians of the retrospectively-defined-school were Lord Acton and Stubbs, with the latter being active near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 'Whig' historiographical tradition, then, far outlived Gibbon, which died at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Only after the First World War it came to be under fierce attacks, until ultimately rejected as an unacceptable form of academic research.

The most prominent, and perhaps most influential, criticism of Whig history came from Butterfield, whose formulation of it became widely accepted<sup>1</sup>.

At the very beginning of his short book "The Whig Interpretation of History"<sup>2</sup>, Butterfield states that his research is concerned with the tendency of various historians who side with the Whigs and the Protestants to manufacture a historical narrative which is in fact an affirmation, if not glorification, of the present. They do so by using certain methods, which reveal traps which any history is bound to fall into, if it is tempted to accept its self-created illusion of finality (that is, presupposes its ability to offer conclusive statements regarding the past) instead of continuously substantiate itself with more research. Some of the main historiographical patterns which the book refers to by the term "The Whig fallacy" are the historian's tendency to attribute a positive function for his moral indignations and judgmental diagnoses (which he considers vital for his self-appointed godlike role as 'the arbitrator' or 'the just scales' of history), and at the same time to disguise them as purely objective, impartial and impersonal observations, as exemplified by the nearly metaphysical expression 'the verdict of history'.

The Whig historian as characterized by Butterfield is inclined to study the past with a direct and perpetual reference to present, in a way that subjugates occurrences which took place in fundamentally different times to the concepts, the thought patterns and the judgments of value of present day. This 'optical illusion' leans on divisions which are automatically applied to each era in history (which is sorted into morally negative reactionary factors which hopelessly try to hinder the coming of progress, and morally positive ones which fight them in order to hasten its inevitable advancement). Thus, the historian reconstructs a deceptively simple image of the past, which consists of anachronism, teleology and tautology; falsely makes analogies between past and present; and ironically assumes its own interpretative rapports to indicate causality, even when it may well be absent. When newly discovered details have the potential of shedding new light on the historical narrative, they are conveniently patched into

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, "Whig History", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whig\\_history](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whig_history) (accessed February 22, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Butterfield, "Introduction", in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), <http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/introduction.html> (accessed February 14, 2011).

the old one without bringing the historian to question his overall organization of facts in the pattern which he is used to; and the findings are lost within the already determined 'large picture'.

Among the main historiographical patterns which the book identifies as 'Whig', are the circular reasoning by which the validity of a theory is ostensibly proven by the application of the selection principle which it derives. For instance, if one already 'knows' that history is 'made by people', he is likely to naturally omit from his historical account eventual and circumstantial details which he considers irrelevant. The remaining factors, on which the abridgement of his findings is to focus, would be personages; a fact that surprisingly validates his a priori assumption regarding the crucial part that extraordinary individuals play in setting the wheels of history in motion. Other fallacies he points out are the Whig over-dramatization of history, which contributes to its simplification, personification and over-generalization; and ultimately, to sloppily sketching it, saliently out of its original context, as a distorted reflection of the present. Other fallacies is the temptation to attribute historical change to prominent individuals, predominant ideas or cataclysmic events ('watersheds'), as a 'shortcut' which rids one from the Sisyphean attempt to trace far more subtle, and often hidden, interactions and mediations between factors ('underground currents'); and the historian's inclination to 'step out' of his 'jurisdiction' and make generalizing, theoretical or judgmental inferences from history, instead of cautiously and diligently unfolding it. His righteous hostility towards people, ideas or phenomena of the past plays a triple role for the historian; as it simultaneously functions as an implicit warning from their assumed contemporary counterparts which he finds threatening; as an aggrandizement of the present on the expense of the ostensibly far less progressive past; and consequently, as an elevation of the historian's own status, given that "finality is the voice of god, and the historian is the voice of finality"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Butterfield, "Moral Judgments in History", in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), [http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/chap\\_6.html](http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/chap_6.html) (accessed February 14, 2011).

The alternative which Butterfield suggests to the simplistically macroscopic and present minded search for similarities between past and present, in a philosophizing way that is really destined to reaffirm the latter; is the microscopic, highly detailed examination of the past for its own sake, in a predominantly descriptive way which would shed light precisely on the dissimilarities between the different times, thus enabling us to expend our minds and deepen our understanding of the dynamic, multilayered variations of human behavior in various circumstances, and consequently, although in an indirect way, of ourselves. Instead of simplistically attributing historical processes to specific personages, ideas or events, the historian should acknowledge that it is an insolvably complex interaction between countless factors, including the conflict between colliding fractions, which is actually responsible to historical change which in most cases none of the parties is interested in (e.g., religious freedom as deriving from the unique circumstances which followed the bloody clash between the perhaps equally authoritarian Catholics and early Protestants, and not promoted by the latter and hindered by the former). Instead of blindly condemning or glorifying the past out of contemporary interests, which only serves to blur his vision of it; the historian main apparatus should be, according to Butterfield, imaginative and insightful sympathy.

Certain features of Gibbon's masterpiece "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" are essentially consistent with the Butterfieldian ideal of the historical specialist, as illustrated by his book. His innovative choice was to dedicate nearly two decades of his life for patiently assembling an inspection which ambitiously spreads over more than a thousand years, and is nevertheless fairly lengthy, highly-detailed, and carefully constructed by being tightly-linked to documentary evidence. By doing so, Gibbon not only laid the foundation for a future scientifically backed historical research; but also established the status of his particular life work as a still preeminent source of factual knowledge in the study field of ancient Rome. For more than two centuries, Gibbon's followers (e.g., Bury and Heather) could distinguish between his theories, which they partially rejected (most notably the role he believed that the conversion to Christianity played in the dissolution of the Roman civic virtue and consequently, its political institutions), and his factual descriptions, which they found

irrefutable<sup>4</sup>. One may find it hard to think of a better exemplar for Butterfield's assertion that it quite legitimate, and possibly even fruitful, for a historian to express his personal opinions and even construct a theory of his research subject; as long as he is not tempted to disguise his observations as facts in a way that would make a distinction between the two impossible, or more complexly, to select and organize the representation of his factual findings according to his subjective preferences<sup>5</sup>. The above mentioned scholars' self-perceived ability of distinguishing Gibbon's findings from his opinions, certainly may indicate that Gibbon has successfully passed Butterfield's test, more than a century before the latter was even born.

Another possible demonstration of Gibbon's meeting Butterfield's criteria for 'Anti-Whiggishness', is the comparison the former makes between the reigns of the Roman Diocletian (284-305) and the English Charles V (1519-1556). Through a close examination of the outward similarities between the two (e.g, the fact that they both withstood a prolonged war, taxed their people excessively as a result from that, and chose to give up their throne in favor of a peaceful private life in about the same age), he shows that underneath the surface both the contexts in which the two ruled, and their personal traits, were highly different<sup>5</sup>. This sort of inquiry seems to be exactly what Butterfield refers to when he writes that the role of the historian is not to search for the present in the past, by looking for similarities between the two and resenting or denying any detail which indicates they are essentially different; but just the opposite, to reveal and emphasize the dissimilarities between the two, thus freeing the past from the chains of present-mindedness and letting it stand in its own right<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_Decline\\_and\\_Fall\\_of\\_the\\_Roman\\_Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_History_of_the_Decline_and_Fall_of_the_Roman_Empire) (accessed February 22, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Butterfield, "The Art of the Historian", in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), [http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/chap\\_5.html](http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/chap_5.html) (accessed February 14, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Butterfield, "The Underlying Assumption", in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), [http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/chap\\_2.html](http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/chap_2.html) (accessed February 14, 2011).

In "Barbarism and Religion: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon"<sup>7</sup>, Pocock seems to support the hypothesis according to which Gibbon's historical vision was too complex, multidimensional and original, to fall into the 'Whig' trap of presenting phenomena - even such which he sharply criticized (e.g, early Christianity as an organized religion) - in a reductionist, flattening or demonizing manner. He writes that in contrast to Voltaire and the Parisian *philosophes* in general, Gibbon "wrote its history as that of an active self-understanding force, not of a mere darkness and absurdity which rendered historical thought impossible. Though an unbeliever, he wrote like a great clerical historian"<sup>8</sup>. Pocock even goes further to implicitly suggest that by attaching to Gibbon the unifying label of an 'enlightenment historiographer' (a term which is not necessarily identical in meaning to 'Whig historian', but which nevertheless bears undeniable resemblances to it), one would be guilty of the Whig fallacy of attributing present views on past personages<sup>9</sup>.

It may seem that the last statement is irrelevant to this discussion, since it was never claimed that the Whig historians, which had strong protestant sentiments, resisted religion as is, and thus Gibbon's perhaps balanced approach to Christianity does not by itself distinguish him from the Whigs. However, the term 'Whig history' is used in a broader sense to indicate a one sided, dichotomist, morally judgmental, simplistic and tendentious historical view. Thus, it may well be said that Gibbon's ability to rise above his cynicism towards the Christianity of antiquity, and make an empathic and evidently fruitful effort to comprehend it from its own points of view, shows how far he exceeds the narrowness of the 'Whig' thought patterns.

Butterfield himself, apparently, was not blind to Gibbon's being an exception from the distant past, to the intellectual fashion he wished to eradicate in the present. Thus he writes, near the end of his 'Anti-Whig' manifest, that "the true historical fervour is the love of the past for the sake of the past. It is the fervour that was awakened in Gibbon and Gregorovius by the sight of the ruins of ancient Rome. And behind it is the very

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<sup>7</sup> J.G.A Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion – Volume I: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>8</sup> There.

<sup>9</sup> There, 9.



passion to understand men in their diversity, the desire to study a bygone age in the things in which it differs from the present"<sup>10</sup>.

One would be mistaken, however, to interpret the richness and complexity of Gibbon's work as uprooting it from the social, political and cultural soil out of which it grew. I find it ironically 'Whiggish' to retrospectively apply Butterfield's formulation on the past, so to dichotomously divide it into the "shallow, simplistic and narrow minded" Whig histories and the few ingenious anomalies which undoubtedly, did not have even the slightest affiliation with their primitive contemporaries. A presentation of this sort of 'the history of historiography' is bound to repeat the very same fallacy which it ostensibly criticizes. It is only reasonable to assume that despite his well-established uniqueness Gibbon, as any intellectual at any given era, was influenced by his predecessors and contemporaries, and shared certain features with them. And indeed, it would be misleading to examine Gibbon's work without contextualizing it generally in the Age of Enlightenment, and specifically, in certain historiographical aspects of it; some of which corresponding to what Butterfield, perhaps too firmly, negated as 'Whig'.

Complicated as his stance regarding Christianity may be, and in spite of his pioneering modernly scientific scrutiny, it would be quite difficult to ignore the fact that Gibbon not only intended to tell his readers a story; but also, that it was a distinctly enlightened one. Gibbon's portrayal of the gradual degeneration of the civic, rational and worldly Roman Empire into what he refers to as "the darkness and confusion of the middle ages"<sup>11</sup>, which he attributes to a large extent to its conversion to Christianity, can be seen as a mirror image of the modern Europe rising, as a phoenix, out of its ashes and renewing its glorious past; as well as, more particularly, the thriving of the English empire as a possible new Rome. The potential chiasmic parallelism between the two civilizations may have implied to Gibbon that the ancient study matter is relevant to current affairs. Such a view may explain his emotionally

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<sup>10</sup> Herbert Butterfield, "The Art of the Historian", in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), [http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/chap\\_5.html](http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/butterfield/chap_5.html) (accessed February 14, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Edward Gibbon, "Preface by the Author", in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Methuen, 1935), 22.

charged approach to the subject, which was possibly the underlying drive for his theory according to which the ancestor of the ecclesiastical hegemony from which Europe had to be freed in order to end the long horrific medieval night, was the one responsible for its entering this gloom in the first place; a theory which several researchers (e.g., Bury, Potter and Millar) rejected as unfounded, while others partially accepted it, but attributed more weight to economic and social factors, from which Gibbon essentially ignored<sup>12</sup>.

According to Pocock<sup>13</sup>, Gibbon's main intention was to write a history which would clarify how the Europeans regained their control over the institutions of the state after 'the long medieval night of barbarism and religion', under the reign of the church. For Gibbon, while ancient history was the triumph of civil authority, modern history was the triumph of ecclesiastical one. He saw his own ability to be modern in the opposite, progressive, sense or the word, as deriving from his scholarly skill of retrospectively observing the ancients, and learning from them what even they were not consciously aware of. Gibbon's history was not interested in the past 'for its own sake', in the Butterfieldian sense; but rather committed for the contemporary widespread goal of enlightened historiography, to found a systematic civil morality which would replace organized religion in the western world.

Bowersock, in "From Gibbon to Auden: Essays on the Classical Tradition", makes an even more decisive argument in favor of the claim that Gibbon was, in various aspects, a historian of the type which can be referred to as 'Whig'. His support of the very same historian liberties of moral indignation, authoritative didacticism and detached philosophizing which Butterfield so strongly rejects, is sharply illustrated by his admiring reference to Hume, one of the most influential English 'Whig' historians, according to which he was "born to instruct and judge mankind" and "has carried into history the light of a profound and elegant philosophy"<sup>14</sup>. Not less revealing of

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<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia, "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_Decline\\_and\\_Fall\\_of\\_the\\_Roman\\_Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_History_of_the_Decline_and_Fall_of_the_Roman_Empire) (accessed February 22, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> J.G.A Pocock, "Introduction", in *Barbarism and Religion – Volume I: The Enlightenment of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> G.W Bowersock, *From Gibbon to Auden: Essays on the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

Gibbon's inclination to make judgments of value which suit the enlightened narrative he wishes to construct, is the paraphrase (of Stevenson's words) which became perhaps the best known segment from his work: "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus."<sup>15</sup>

Other evidence which Bowersock provides for Gibbon's 'inherent Whiggishness' is his scornful dismissal of internal revolts; even ones which were clearly significant, such as the two Jewish rebellions and the bagaudae<sup>16</sup> insurrection (he falsely compares the latter to 14<sup>th</sup> century incidents in France and England). This attitude may be explained by Gibbon's anxiety of events in his own time, such as the American Revolution, which he considered to be mob riots endangering social stability; and projected his worries regarding them on occurrences which he saw as their ancient counterparts, thus distorting his historical perception of the past. Bowersock subtly mocks this evident present-mindedness to which even the great historian was not immune, in writing that "Gibbon relished of making parallels and predictions but... was not always at his most perceptive in doing so"<sup>17</sup>.

In conclusion, Butterfield's 'Anti-Whig' manifest was bound to use theoretical abstractions, dichotomous divisions and overgeneralizations in its formulation of 'the historical writing rules of conduct'. Ironically, it thus replicated the very same application of predetermined, absolute and subtlety-blind thought patterns which it challenged, from the sphere of history to the one of historiography. Considering Gibbon's work in the light of Butterfield's views vividly demonstrates that just as the latter has claimed, only close examination of the particular would reveal its unique complexity; which could never be apparent through the mediation of any form of macroscopic labeling.

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<sup>15</sup> There.

<sup>16</sup> Peasant insurgents in the Roman Empire who rose during the Crisis of the Third Century, and persisted until the very end of the western Empire.

<sup>17</sup> G.W Bowersock, *From Gibbon to Auden: Essays on the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

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