

17th February

Memory verse

For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.
1 Corinthians 11:26

On the 17th February 1776 the first volume of a very influential history book, that is still in print and read today, was published. Edward Gibbon's (1737-1794) *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was the life's work of the author. The monumental history was not completed until May 1788 with the publication of the sixth volume.



Edward Gibbon lived at a time when there was a great deal of interest in the old Roman Empire. The discovery of the ruins of Pompeii in 1748 and other archaeological sites stimulated interest and influenced architecture, painting, sculpture and even fashions.

Gibbon set out in his book to chart the fall of the great Roman civilisation that was being uncovered at Pompeii and other places. He also wanted to find a reason for that fall. He wrote his great book in a style now called Ciceronian prose after the Latin author Cicero. Gibbon's style, however, unlike that of Cicero himself, seems designed to stretch the readers powers of memory to the utmost, making continuous reading very tiring by forcing the reader to re-read sentences to get at the sense. Here is an example:

Like the modesty affected by Augustus, the state maintained by Diocletian was a theatrical representation: but it must be confessed that, of the two comedies, the former was of a much more liberal and manly character than the latter. It was the aim of the one to disguise, and the object of the other to display, the unbounded power which the emperors possessed over the Roman world.

Volume 1 Chapter 13 part 4

This is difficult to understand so here is my translation:

Augustus affected [pretended] modesty. This was like a theatrical representation [it was not real]. Diocletian also maintained a state that was like a theatrical representation. Augustine's affectation was liberal and manly. It aimed to disguise the unbounded power which the emperors possessed over the Roman world. Diocletian's aim, on the other hand, was to display that unbounded power.

OR

Augustus was modest: Diocletian was boastful.

Now re read Gibbon's original sentences again. Do you understand them now? In my translation I could not find a place for the word "comedies". This word gives a slightly sneering effect to the whole thing. Both Augustus' and Diocletian's had something of the ludicrous about them, Gibbon seems to be saying.

As a young man at university, Gibbon had converted from his Church of England background to Roman Catholicism. This at once disqualified him from Oxford and he had to leave. His father was not pleased. Roman Catholicism also disqualified Gibbon from inheriting his father's estate at his death. Gibbon was packed off to Switzerland to stay with a protestant pastor charged with the task of making him change his mind. Gibbon did change his mind and returned to the Church of England. Just how this experience affected him is not clear but it seems to have left him with an understanding of at least some of the problems with Roman Catholicism. However this did not lead

on to him turning to the truth of the Bible; rather he seems to have developed a distaste for it that comes out in his enormous book.

Gibbon like many historians of his day, believed in human progress. He saw human society as constantly changing and moving, although not always regularly and without set backs, towards a better and better state. The Christian view of history is totally different to this as we see history as the story of God's unfolding providence moving towards the final consummation of all things when Christ returns. Technological progress is the effect of being able to build on past achievements. Society itself does not progress. We are no better at logic or literature, for instance, than we have ever been.

In his book, Gibbon describes the Roman Empire as noble, more noble than Christianity. He decided that the fall of the Empire, a set back (in his eyes) to human progress, had been hastened by Christianity. He criticises the credulous acceptance of miracle tales in the early medieval church although he stopped short of criticising the accounts of miracles of the New Testament, perhaps not wanting to be accused of blasphemy.

Part of Gibbon's problem is that he seems to have no real idea of what Christianity is. Notice that in the following extract he is blaming some very unchristian things on Christianity though he admits that they can be viewed as “the abuse” of Christianity:

As the happiness of a future life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal that the introduction, or at least the abuse, of Christianity had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire. The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister: a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion; and the soldiers' pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity. Faith, zeal, curiosity, and more Earthly passions of malice and ambition kindled the flame of theological discord; the church, and even the state, were distracted by religious factions, whose conflicts were sometimes bloody and always implacable; the attention of the emperors was diverted from camps to synods; the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny; and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of their country.

Whether or not the introduction of monasticism and a persecuting church hierarchy are to blame (if blame is the right word) for the fall of the Roman Empire, Gibbon's ideas are questioned by secular historians today. The assumptions that prompted them such as “the march of progress” have not been abandoned though, especially in popular history writing. Watch out for them as you read your history books.

A war time adventure to read¹



The British submarine Thrasher lay off Crete in the early morning of February 17th 1941, rolling gently on the surface of the sea while two men on the upper deck risked their lives in an attempt to

¹¹ Adapted from Owen, Evan, What Happened Today? Book 1 available on the Mothers' Companion flashdrive <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com/>

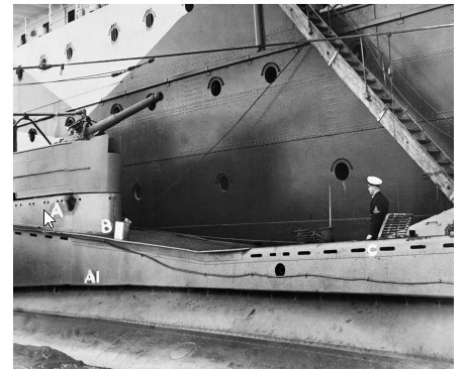
save the vessel and the men below.

During an engagement with enemy aircraft on the previous day two bombs had lodged in the fabric of the deck without exploding. Lieutenant Roberts and Petty Officer Gould had volunteered for the task of freeing the bombs and rolling them into the sea.

The first bomb was rolling freely on the deck, held only by the deck rails. Although it weighed over ninety kilograms it was not long before the two men had it dragged clear of the rails and rolled it overboard, knowing all the time that the slightest jolt might easily cause it to explode.

The second bomb, however, was held fast. It had penetrated the deck casing and lay among the pipes and torpedo tubes. First Robert and Gould had to squeeze themselves into the hole with the bomb; then they had to push and pull until they could manoeuvre its metres and more of length up and onto the deck. It gradually came free, giving out alarming noises in the process. At any moment, thought the men, it may go off! At last the monster lay on the deck, rolling with the swell of the sea. Lieutenant Roberts ordered "Full steam ahead"; the submarine shot forward and the deadly object disappeared over the stern. The submarine and its crew were safe.

In this picture from the Imperial War Museums collection, letter A shows where the bomb penetrated the gun platform. A1 shows the position where the bomb was discovered inside the casing. B shows the position where the other unexploded bomb was discovered lying on the casing. In the picture the bomb is represented by the tin can. Petty Officer Gould, is standing in the casing-hatch through which bomb from A1 was dragged.



For their brave action Lieutenant P.S.W. Roberts and Petty Officer T.W. Gould were awarded the Victoria Cross.

More about submarines in the lessons for January 21st, March 25th and May 10th .

Something to write

If you enjoy adventure fiction you might like to re write the above factual account as if it was an episode from a story. Start you story however you want but a good beginning might be:

Petty Officer Gould's stomach was churning. He was appalled at what he had done. How could he have volunteered for such a task? If a job needs doing you get on and do it. That's what his father used to say – but this...