

The Pocockiad

BY DAVID ARMITAGE

BACK IN THE HALCYON days of pre-postmodernity, we knew what Enlightenment was: It was rational and reformist, skeptical and secular, French and *philosophe*. Whether seen as the construction of “the heavenly city of the eighteenth-century philosophers” (by Carl Becker) or “the rise of modern paganism” (by Peter Gay), the Enlightenment promised human liberation from superstition, absolutism, and the dead hand of dogma. But two generations of philosophers—from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno to Michel Foucault and beyond—have challenged this received idea. Nowadays, the Enlightenment is a project, and we know that universalism leads only to conformity. Its most characteristic institution was therefore not the salon but the panopticon.

While philosophers were exposing these dark legacies, historians were reconstructing a number of diverse Enlightenments, both metropolitan and provincial, in St. Petersburg and Williamsburg, Lisbon and Edinburgh, Naples and Uppsala. Eighteenth-century England has been more or less absent from these revisions. Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Sir Isaac Newton may be considered among the founding fathers of the Age of Reason, but the later era of Samuel Johnson was evidently too Tory to be revolutionary, too Anglican to be anticlerical, and too reasonable to be truly rationalist. The exception who proved the rule was Edward Gibbon, the author of the *Decline and Fall of the*

Roman Empire. In the judgment of the historian Franco Venturi, Gibbon was “the English giant of the Enlightenment,” albeit one whose skepticism, Francophilia, and cosmopolitan erudition rendered him “a solitary figure in his own country.” Gibbon played no part in English political reform or protest, spent much of his adult life abroad, remained silent on the question of the decline and fall of the British Empire after 1776 (even though he sat in Parliament during America’s Revolutionary War), and was positively Burkean in his dyspeptic reaction to the “new barbarians” of the French Revolution. It has been easier to ignore Gibbon than to assimilate him to the standard interpretations of the Enlightenment, and this has left the English apparently unenlightened and the Enlightenment with no great English representative.

J.G.A. Pocock would like to rectify this situation. The first two volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* launch an ambitious effort to examine the Enlightenment through Gibbon’s eyes. Like all of Pocock’s major works—from his study of seventeenth-century English legal thought in *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957) to his influential reconstruction of the politics of civic virtue in *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975)—these volumes place changing modes of historical consciousness into highly detailed social and political contexts.

The first volume, *The Enlightenment of Edward Gib-*

bon, 1737–1764, traces Gibbon’s early life in Anglican England, through his adolescent years in Lausanne (where he was sent to be cured of a youthful bout of Roman Catholicism), to his service in the English militia, his sojourns in the salons of Paris, and on to the conception of the *Decline and Fall* itself in 1764. The Enlightenments that Gibbon knew were Protestant, skeptical, and martial. Though the forms varied according to setting—Bourbon France, Georgian England, Calvinist Switzerland—the aims were consistent: to defang every species of religious enthusiasm, to replace “the authority inherent in the text by the study of the human mind or minds that had produced it,” and to elevate reason from a mere instrument of political reform into the ground of orderly consensus.

THESE ENLIGHTENMENTS harmonized because they shared a common origin in recent religious disputes. But the champions of Enlightenment also shared more antique preoccupations. Medieval Christianity and feudalism were the historical nightmare from which Europe had finally awoken in Gibbon’s lifetime; they now belonged to a past whose history Gibbon and his contemporaries could recount. In his second volume, *Narratives of Civil Government*, Pocock traces the emergence of an “Enlightened narrative” of modernity in the titans of eighteenth-century historicism—not all of them necessarily historians—best

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Gibbon, 1737–1764
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known to Gibbon: the Neapolitan Pietro Giannone; Voltaire; and the Scotsmen David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson. These writers told a narrative with obscure beginnings, an extensive middle (the “Christian millennium,” which stretched either from Constantine to the emperor Charles V, or from Charlemagne to Louis XIV), and a recent, salutary modern end. “Church had replaced empire,” and then ruled for a thousand benighted years, “until the monarchies of France and England had restored the primacy of civil society.” One of the greatest triumphs in this genre was Robertson’s *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769), which garnered what was then the largest advance ever paid for a history: a sure sign that readers as well as writers wanted enlightened narrative during what Hume called “the historical age.”

Among the enlightened enterprises, Gibbon’s history was unique. By starting in late antiquity and ending with the fall of Byzantium in 1453, while “barbarism and religion” still reigned triumphant, the *Decline and Fall* refused to tell the story of the rise of modern freedom. By choice, Gibbon never reached the modern world—the civil, commercial, postimperial, postfeudal, and postecclesiastical international order of the eighteenth century. Instead, he took two steps back from modernity, to a late antiquity that included much of Asia and the Muslim world. The boundaries of Gibbon’s history were those of the far-flung Roman Empire itself; he put as much emphasis on its eastern territories as on the west. According to Pocock, he produced “a world history written on a Eurasian...scale.”

THE FIRST TWO VOLUMES of Pocock’s *Barbarism and Religion* recall the early volumes of the *Decline and Fall* by the striking absence of their subject. Gibbon’s history has so far appeared only in allusions and passing references. Pocock is aware of such parallels with Gibbon’s own work, even to the point of some identification with Gibbon himself. Pocock tells us that he conceived his history in Rome’s Piazza Paganica, in a scene reminiscent of the

of maintaining both its apostolic and its statutory foundations, of reconciling the spirit with the law, grace with works, revelation with social reason.” A verdict such as “Enlightened culture, like the Enlightened state, was in many ways secularized baroque” could inspire decades of scholarship more.

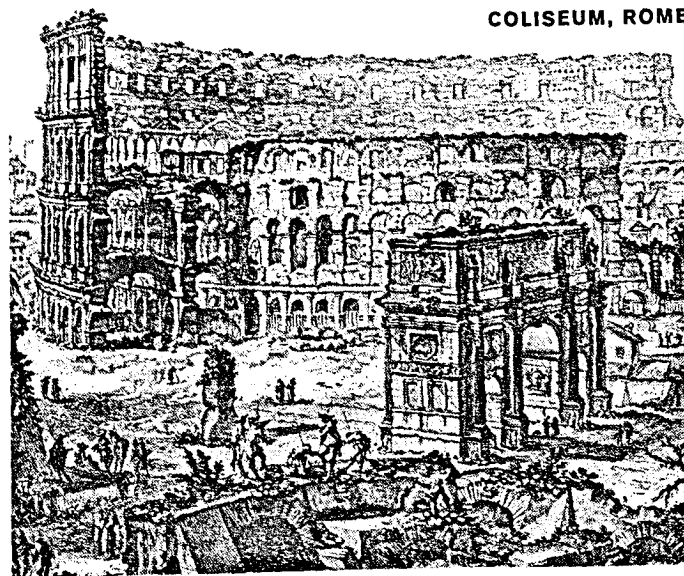
In five pages on public space in seventeenth-century England, Pocock offers a more suggestive account of the peculiar intimacy of state and civil society than anyone else

the Hampshire grenadiers.” Passages like these are the more than incidental rewards for consuming these two volumes whole.

IN THE CLOSING PAGES OF *Narratives of Civil Government*, Pocock notes that Gibbon found his masterpiece “easier to envisage than execute” and quotes the historian’s gloomy opinion that the later volumes of the *Decline and Fall* were “more prolix and less entertaining than the first.” Pocock balances this with his own judgment that once Gibbon found his voice and method, “things of extraordinary richness and diversity began to happen,” though he “found difficulty in explaining [his] project to others, even perhaps to himself.” In the end, Gibbon’s hermetic brilliance “has left him a very great figure, but one very selectively read.”

Such judgments may hint at Pocock’s own hopes and fears for *Barbarism and Religion*, another multivolume magnum opus as yet incomplete, unfulfilled, and fragmentary, with its central subject announced but after more than seven hundred pages only barely introduced. The real payoff lies ahead, in the promised analysis of the *Decline and Fall* itself as an enlightened history. If Pocock is pleading with his readers (and his publisher) for patience and indulgence, then he is amply entitled to do so. There’s this consolation: While they wait, his readers will have plenty of time to read (or reread) the *Decline and Fall*.

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COLISEUM, ROME

Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* was a unique Enlightenment text: It refused to tell the story of the rise of modern freedom.

famous genesis of Gibbon’s work in 1764 “at Rome...as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed fryars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter.”

As with the *Decline and Fall*, the grandeur of Pocock’s conception amazes, but it is often the asides and aperçus that linger longest in the mind. A succinct portrait may summarize decades of scholarship, as when Pocock describes the Church of England as bedeviled by “the central difficulties

could provide in fifty, relating the lack of an overbearing absolutism, the prominence of the press, the distinctive “interplay between court, city, and country,” and the growth of a reading public (much of it female) in the eighteenth century. Pocock reaffirms the centrality of the Seven Years War (1756–1763) to eighteenth-century historiography by tracing most of the great enlightened histories back to the conflict, which Gibbon experienced as “captain of