

theory nor a sense of the need for one ; and only after he had gone far did his subject-matter force him to generalise. When he does, it is only by the way, as aforesaid ; but on the other hand he does not, as Mr. Morison in a previous passage asserts, explicitly contradict himself on a clear and vital issue. "On the interesting question of the introduction of the barbarians into the frontier provinces, *and* their incorporation into the legions," says the critic,<sup>1</sup> "he never seems to have quite made up his mind. In the twelfth chapter he calls *it* a 'great and beneficial plan.' Subsequently he calls *it* a disgraceful and fatal expedient." This is one of Mr. Morison's too frequent errors. Two expedients are under notice, and what Gibbon did was to applaud one—the settling of barbarians on the frontier<sup>2</sup>—and condemn the other, the *enlistment* of barbarians in the legions.<sup>3</sup> What is more, it was the special settlement of "captive or fugitive barbarians" on the frontier by Probus that he praised, because in that settlement the colonists were placed under Roman institutions. A little further on<sup>4</sup> he condemns as a "dangerous indulgence" the permission given by Diocletian and his colleagues to several colonies of Carpi, Bastarnae, and Sarmatians, to retain "in some measure their national manners and independence." The judgment may be right or wrong, but the cases were vitally different.

Finally, the enlistment of outside barbarians was an expedient on a different footing from either of these ; and Gibbon actually speaks of it as being, even when cautiously managed, a "dangerous reinforcement," in the very page in which he approves of

<sup>1</sup> *Gibbon*, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* ii, 221 (ch. xvii).

<sup>2</sup> Bohn ed. i, 403 (ch. xii).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* i, 434 (ch. xiii).

the early settlement of barbarian colonies under Roman auspices—a measure which, as he points out, really succeeded extremely well. When he notes that in the fourth century the enlistment of outer barbarians “became every day more universal, more necessary, and more fatal,” he points in particular to the fact that they were enrolled in masses “not only in the auxiliaries of their respective nations, but in the legions themselves, and among the most distinguished of the Palatine troops”—the crowning fatality.<sup>1</sup> Here there is no contradiction whatever, but a sound discrimination.

When, however, Gibbon proceeds at the end of his twenty-seventh chapter to specify as “the immediate cause of the downfall of the empire” the abandonment of cuirasses and helmets by the army in the reign of Gratian (375–383), he really sets up a spurious cause, and—though Mr. Morison does not note it—contradicts himself; for in his last note to the previous chapter he had emphatically specified as “the principal *and immediate* cause of the fall of the western empire of Rome” the great settlement of Goths in the East, begun in the reign of Valens. In representing the mere abandonment of heavy armour as the immediate cause of a collapse which was not consummated till a generation later—and this in the face of the fact that Stilicho utterly destroyed the army of Rhadagast in 406—Gibbon is weakly following the militarist empiricism of Vegetius, being led thereto by Montesquieu, whom in the previous case he had rather captiously censured; and his acquiescence in such an

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Morison, in a confused passage, says Gibbon does not “explicitly” bring out the fact that almost the only defenders of the empire against the non-Romanised barbarian invaders were the Romanised barbarians in its pay. In chapter xxvi (vol. iii, pp. 206–9) Gibbon really puts the case quite clearly.

entirely inadequate theory is a proof that he was not well founded in his own judgment.

## XI.

A far more incisive thought emerges when, at the close of the thirty-fifth chapter, the historian declares that "If all the barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire of the West; and if Rome still survived, she survived the loss of freedom, of virtue, and of honour." And at the end of the thirty-first—it is always at the ends of his chapters that we get the sociological reflections—there is a very striking verdict on the vain attempt of Honorius to set up a provincial assembly in Gaul. It is hardly consistent with the previous comment on the frontier experiments of Diocletian; but it points with an insight not before attained to the essential causation of imperial decay:—

If such an institution, which gave the people an interest in their own government, had been universally established, by Trajan or the Antonines, the seeds of public wisdom and virtue might have been cherished and propagated in the empire of Rome.....Under the mild and generous influence of liberty the Roman Empire might have remained invincible and immortal; or if its excessive magnitude and the instability of human affairs had opposed such perpetual continuance, its vital and constituent members might have separately preserved their vigour and independence. But in the decline of the empire, when every principle of health and life had been exhausted, the tardy application of this partial remedy was incapable of producing any important or salutary effects. The emperor Honorius expressed his surprise that he must compel the reluctant provinces to accept a privilege which they should ardently have solicited. A fine of three, or even five pounds of gold was imposed on the absent representatives, who seem to have declined this imaginary gift of a free constitution as the last and most

cruel insult of their oppressors—this though they were empowered to expose the grievances and wishes of their constituents ; to moderate the excessive or unequal weight of taxes ; and to deliberate on every subject of local or national importance that could tend to the restoration of the peace and prosperity of the seven provinces.

So far as it goes, the insight here is so clear that we are set wondering why it did not go further. Later, indeed, it did go further. On his annotated copy he wrote : “Should I not have deduced the decline of the Empire from the civil wars that ensued after the fall of Nero, or even from the tyranny which succeeded the reign of Augustus? Alas ! I should ; but of what avail is this tardy knowledge? Where error is irreparable, repentance is useless.”<sup>1</sup> Thus did the sheer total pressure of the subject slowly move him from point to point of valid speculation, after his early bent to theory had been for years overborne by the fascination and distraction of its detail. But even here he is only moving towards the solution ; he has not compassed it.

It is by standing on his shoulders that we can see further : it is by absorbing without effort his splendid distillation of the history of an era, by subsisting at our ease on his rich granary of observation, that we can reach the conclusion of which he came short. From his pages more convincingly than from any other man’s work we can learn the lesson that the moral and political decline of Rome began before Augustus ; that the first prince’s restrained autocracy and the measureless tyranny which followed it are in their date and degree alike the due sequel of the imperialism which preceded ; that the doom was sealed when once the destiny of dominion was

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Dr. Bury in his Introduction, p. xxxv.

nationally embraced. Empire, in the only significant sense of the word, *is* decline; that is the beginning and the end of the whole matter. To be clear, we must define our terms. The "British Empire" is strictly a mere geographical expression as regards the self-governing colonies. Empire is properly national *imperium*; and in the exact ratio in which dominion displaces self-rule and self-development in either the dominating or the dominated race, it spells decadence. In Roman history there is no break and no arrest in the moral process from the moment when the Senate had clearly grasped the purpose of putting a Roman yoke on the neighbouring peoples of Italy: on the day they thus gave the lie to their own code of political right, humanity being what it was, they began the evolution which ended in Augustulus. Nothing short of the resolve *not* to war for empire could have saved the state; and already in the days of the Gracchi, when it had its last recognisable chance to change its course of growth, the evil had gone too far for men's capacity of self-judgment. The very reformers were attainted with the disease against which they empirically strove: the people had too long been drugged by the bribe of empire to work their own salvation, too long debauched by the vile joy of crushing other men's liberties to be capable of saving their own. That is the "why" and the "how" of the process of the annihilation of the state by the empire, of which Coleridge merely noted the occurrence, as the youthful Gibbon and Montesquieu had done before him.

Let him who doubts it all begin with Gibbon's judgment on the situation under Honorius. It was *then* impossible to regenerate the empire by methods which might conceivably have prospered earlier. But

what could have taught Trajan to plan the regeneration of the empire by giving Home Rule to the provinces? The very purpose and ideal of empire was the perfect subordination of the provinces: from the point of view of the emperor, a self-governing province would have been the extremity of possible menace to the imperium. Sooner would he dream of re-creating the Roman *comitia* of the days before Cæsar, the power of the tribunes and the tumultuous play of the will of the plebs. Dimly seeing as much after his book is written, Gibbon recedes for a starting or turning-point to the anarchy after Nero; and then, realising at once why there was such anarchy, to the tyranny of Tiberius. But whence that, if not from the roots of the principate of Augustus? And whence that but from the fatal triumph of Julius and the succeeding convulsions of the triumvirate? And whence the triumph of Julius but from the Senate's lust of empire? Why the deadly conquest of Gaul, unless because of the conquests of Greece and Spain? And whence extra-Italian empire save as the sequel of empire within Italy?

It is all so sequent, for those who will think sequently, that we must finally endorse the dictum of Coleridge: the History does not philosophically explain the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. We can but repeat, in qualification of the judgment, that Coleridge himself no more adequately solved the problem than Gibbon had done; and that Gibbon, with an industry of which Coleridge could but dream, had colligated though he did not synthesise the evidence. Or let us go just one step further and realise that Gibbon had made an advance towards the full view such as none had made before him, unless it be Montesquieu, who likewise failed to impose his

conclusion conspicuously on his admirable essay. The whole of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, be it remembered, had lived and died without suspecting that the so-called rise of Rome was of a piece with its fall ; or that empire is just a lengthened arc of decay. Dante never dreamt that the Roman dominion was aught but a splendid achievement which somehow miscarried as all human things do ; his dream for the world was to repeat the effort. The keen eye of Machiavelli, searching in Roman records for the secrets of Roman greatness, could not see that from the first the empire carried ruin in its womb. He indeed flatly opposed mere conquest ; but he clung to the earlier Roman policy of paramountcy over allies, which was but the thin end of the wedge of conquest. The doom of medieval Italy was upon even his clear spirit : he could see no alternative to expansion but subjugation ; no destiny for states but to enslave or be enslaved ; and he toiled subtly at the old impossibility of framing a perpetual motion of bondage-working liberty. For him the problem of the state was to succeed in the Roman way without paying the Roman price, without incurring the Roman ruin—a thing not in the power of Gods or men. States can subsist healthily and progressively only under conditions in which their citizens all round act as moral checks upon each other. When that function is paralysed by co-operation in tyranny or rapine, social dissolution begins with the certainty of a law of nature.

In Gibbon's day, after Spain and France had in their fortunately restricted measure wrought out afresh the old demonstration, men had not yet learned the ancient lesson, though some were learning it in relation to contemporary things. England, after being

arrested after the first step on a new road of imperialism under Cromwell, had resumed the march under Chatham ; and who was to say in that generation that there was a fell fatality in the great example which England was supposed to be copying? Nay, how many have seen it yet? I have confessed that the nineteenth century substantially failed, in England as elsewhere, to read the visible lesson of Gibbon's mighty record. Save in the voices of protesting minorities there is nothing in our public life or our popular literature to show that Englishmen in general, educated or uneducated, see any more deeply into the case of the Roman Empire than he did, or even that they realise what he actually set forth. Most of them if they could would set out on the old Roman path with the proverbial "light heart" of the dullard on the road to ruin. They have neither the character nor the intelligence that should win them a better fate. We have hardly the right, then, to impute it to Gibbon as a short-coming that over a century ago he was not conspicuously wiser.

Still, when we analyse his error down to its sources in his character, we shall be bound to admit in strict justice that as a political organism, as a man in the civic relation to his fellows, he figures at his worst. The slow growth and fitfulness of his sense of the causes of ruin in antiquity correlates with his incurious and unjudging relation to the process of misgovernment in his own day. Above all, it is to be understood in the light of his outbreak over the French Revolution, which he had no more foreseen than he did the end of Lord North's American policy when he began blandly voting in its support in the House of Commons. All those years of close contemplation of the downward course of ancient things had left him



not a whit more philosophically alive to the main drift of his own age than the most superficial of its politicians. The residual fact is so staggering to all optimism, so obscure at first sight to the believer in the intelligibility of all causation, that to it we must finally address ourselves if we would synthesise our judgment of the man. We end, as we began, with our attention fixed on the concrete personality, the complex of bias and circumstance, genius and limitation, greatness and littleness, which we name Gibbon.

## XII.

There is a sharp descent in the order of our sensations when we turn from the historian of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire to the member of Parliament; and there is a further descent to be made when we contemplate him in his last years screaming over the French Revolution. That Gibbon should have been a steady supporter of the ministry of Lord North, while that most amiable of men was losing half the British Empire at the orders of his king, deeply averse to the task, but outwardly imperturbable in the doing of it—this is so perplexing a fact that one casts about on all sides for an explanation. Was Gibbon bent solely on securing a sinecure? Was the contemplative historian really as blind as the Tory majority to the madness of the course taken? Or was he so charmed by North's wit and invincible urbanity as to give his support to the Minister without caring how the policy went?

The answer must be a half-yes to the first and last questions, and a half-no to the other. First we have Gibbon's voluntary avowal to his friend Deyverdun:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter of May 20, 1783.

“You have not forgotten that I went into Parliament without patriotism and without ambition, and that all my views tended to the convenient and respectable place of a lord of trade. That situation I at length obtained.” He had to wait for it five years, entering Parliament in 1774, getting his post in 1779, and losing it finally in 1782, when the Board was abolished at North’s fall, by way of fulfilling Burke’s scheme of “economical reform.” Had he been capable of speaking in Parliament, he would doubtless have been sooner and better rewarded; but, as he repeatedly avowed, he shrank from oral debate. The good speakers, he said, filled him with despair, the bad ones with terror. He was essentially a man of the study and the desk. As it was, for his “sincere and silent vote” he got an office worth £700 a year for three years; and the money was a serious help to his fortunes, straitened as they were by the selfishness of his spendthrift father. There can be no question that this gain was his primary object in accepting the seat for the pocket borough of Liskeard.<sup>1</sup>

But though he speaks of his “sincere” vote, there is plenty of evidence that he was not blind to the folly of the king’s course of coercion, carried out for him by the secretly reluctant North. Mr. Morison, whose criticism at this point we are bound to endorse, understated even the evidence before him; and the issue of Gibbon’s complete correspondence supplies more. At the beginning of 1775 he writes that he thinks the cause of the Government “in this instance the cause of England”; but already in February he thinks

<sup>1</sup> See the unmutated version of his letter to Holroyd, of September 10, 1774, describing his significant bargain with his cousin Eliot, the “owner” of the seat.—*Private Letters of Edward Gibbon*, Prothero’s ed. 1896, i, 228–9.

that not enough troops are being sent to Boston ; and in June he writes :<sup>1</sup> "I have not courage to write about America.....The boldest tremble, the most vigorous talk of peace." Even in the letter of the autumn<sup>2</sup> in which he tells how "the same lawless spirit and impatience of government which has infected our colonies has gone forth among the Canadian peasants," he gives as from "a man who might tell me a lye, but who could not be mistaken," the pretence that the addresses from the large trading towns urging the prosecution of the war came unsolicited. So in the autumn of 1776 he assures his sanguine Tory friend that "the *thinking* friends of Government are by no means sanguine"; in the winter of 1777 he banters him on his "noble firmness"; and early in the next year he writes,<sup>3</sup> à propos of North's tardy attempt at conciliation: "I suppose you imagine that a reluctant effort of reason is at once to efface past errors, to command present acquiescence, and to inspire future confidence."

But there is still more decisive evidence. Mr. Morison lightly treated as a probable invention the circumstantial story that Fox wrote in a copy of Gibbon's History these words: "The author at Brooks's said that there was no salvation for this country until six heads of the principal persons in administration were laid upon the table. Yet, eleven days afterwards, the same gentleman accepted a place of a lord of trade under these very ministers, and has acted with them ever since." There are certainly some very unplausible stories told against Gibbon, but this is not one of them. We have now the full text

<sup>1</sup> Letter suppressed by Sheffield. Prothero's ed. ii, 260.

<sup>2</sup> October 14, 1775.

<sup>3</sup> February 23, 1778. Passage suppressed by Sheffield.

of one of his formerly mutilated letters,<sup>1</sup> in which he says : " I still repeat that in my opinion Lord N. does not deserve pardon for the past, applause for the present, or confidence for the future."

And yet, as all the world knows, he indirectly dedicated to Lord North the fourth volume of his History, speaking of him in the preface as a statesman who when in power " had many political opponents, almost without a personal enemy," and who, " under the pressure of severe infirmity, enjoys the lively vigour of his mind and the felicity of his incomparable temper." Lord North, he adds, " will permit me to express the feelings of friendship in the language of truth ; but even truth and friendship should be silent, if he still dispensed the favours of the crown." It is hard to know how to take this historic pronouncement when we learn from the un mutilated correspondence that the person so resentfully mentioned in the letter of 20th December, 1783, asterisked by Sheffield, was just Lord North. The passage runs :—

To you, in the confidence of friendship, and without either pride or resentment, I will fairly own that I am somewhat of Gerard's opinion [that Gibbon had been badly used by the late Ministry] : and if I did not compare it with the rest of his character, I should be astonished that Lord N[orth] suffered me to depart, without even a civil answer to my letter. Were I capable of hating a man whom it is not easy to hate, I should find myself most amply revenged by the insignificance of the creature in this mighty revolution of India, his own peculiar department.<sup>2</sup>

At least we may say that the changed tone of five years later proves a magnanimous placability ;<sup>3</sup> and it

<sup>1</sup> Feb. 28th, 1778. Prothero, i, 331.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, ii, 87.

<sup>3</sup> There is also to be noted the effect of the general discovery that the loss of the colonies did no commercial harm, but the contrary.

will be fair as well as charitable to add that the pecuniary needs which had moved the great historian to play the hired partisan in Parliament for eight years were a heavy and perturbing burden for such a man, so placed, and concerned to provide not only for his own eagerly desired literary leisure, but for the comfort of his kind stepmother. His steady and active affection for her and his aunt and his friends is the redeeming side of his whole private life.<sup>1</sup> But the place-hunting episode none the less belongs to the character of the man whose cheek "rarely flushed in enthusiasm for a good cause"; and his later bearing at a far greater crisis of European history forces us finally to realise that the greatest of historians was so in virtue of the learned sagacity which masters and appraises the lore of a dead past, not of the sensitive rectitude and righteous sympathy which make a wise man morally great for his own time. Concerning the miserable American war he had simply never made up his mind. Like the ruck of his countrymen, he affirmed its "justice" without being able for a moment to show its necessity. In other words, as regards international relations he stood by the political ethic of barbarism, without the pretext of barbaric passion. But to say that is only to say that he was on the moral footing of many Englishmen of a century later.

Gibbon was one of the first to see that the separation would not in itself be a loss. "You recollect," he writes to Sheffield in 1792, "that we ought to have been ruined by the independence of America—*selon toutes les règles*, except mine and a few others" (ii, 288).

<sup>1</sup> The charm of his personality on this side is cordially acknowledged by General Read, who writes, after the long and wide biographical survey on which he entered because of his interest in Gibbon: "I must confess that I rise from my task with profound sympathy and sincere regard" (ii, 285).

## XIII.

When he returned to Lausanne for his last spell of residence there, Gibbon's character was formed by work, by experience of the world, by success, and by disappointment. He had already made a great reputation, and he was determined to extend and secure it. And if something had been lost by his five years of place-hunting and three of place-holding, some practical insight had doubtless been gained therein. We have now to realise him in his last period.

So much has been done by Christian malice to disparage Gibbon as a man that we are bound to sift vigilantly the anecdotes told to his discredit. Some of the most popular have many signs of fable upon them. I confess at least to an irremovable scepticism over the story told by Sir James Bland Burges, of Gibbon's being put to open confusion by the youthful Pitt—a story which reads very like a reconstruction of that about Gibbon's brush with Mably. Sir James was a garrulous memoirist, who certainly had either a very good memory<sup>1</sup> or a fertile imagination; and as he penned his narrative about Gibbon *thirty-eight years after the alleged event*, the alternatives in that case are left extremely open. By his account, Gibbon, at a certain dinner-party given by the narrator in

<sup>1</sup> It is fair to say that his powers of memory were praised by Richard Cumberland (*Bland Burges Papers*, p. 310); but *his* memory and morals were so bad that he habitually and wilfully told of Anthony Collins a story that, as was pointed out to him, could not possibly be true of Anthony, though it might be true of Arthur Collins. See I. Disraeli's *Curiosities of Literature*, ed. 1867, p. 386. Sir J. B. Burges collaborated with Cumberland in his egregious religious poem, *The Exodiad*. Both were likely enough to dislike Gibbon, and the baronet's biographer avows that "both were hot-tempered, painfully self-conscious, extremely vain, and impulsive to a degree that marred their judgment" (p. 311).

Lincoln's Inn in the year 1780, talked very brilliantly and amusingly, till, just as he had concluded

one of his best foreign anecdotes, in which he had introduced some of the fashionable levities of political doctrine then prevalent, the "deep-toned but clear" voice of Pitt was heard "very calmly but civilly impugning the correctness of the narrative and the propriety of the doctrines of which it had been made the vehicle." Gibbon then debated the point with great ability till, "finding himself driven into a corner from which there was no escape, he made some excuse for rising from the table, and walked out of the room. I followed him," says the memoirist, "and, finding that he was looking for his hat, I tried to persuade him to return to his seat. 'By no means,' said he. 'That young gentleman is, I have no doubt, extremely ingenious and agreeable, but I must acknowledge that his style of conversation is not exactly what I am accustomed to, so you must positively excuse me.' And away he went in high dudgeon, notwithstanding that his friend [Holroyd, afterwards Lord Sheffield] had come to my assistance."<sup>1</sup>

Now, Gibbon in a letter of 1782,<sup>2</sup> to his stepmother, remarks that he has "no connection, public or private," with the young Pitt, whose father Mrs. Gibbon had disliked, but goes on to speak of him with cordial praise, saying: "We cannot refuse to admire a youth of four-and-twenty whom eloquence and real merit have already made Chancellor of the Exchequer without his promotion occasioning either surprise or censure." In 1784 he writes to Lord Eliot from Lausanne, concerning Pitt, that "a youth of twenty-five, who raises himself to the government of an empire by the power of genius and the reputation of virtue, is not less glorious to the country than to himself."<sup>3</sup> In 1785 he writes to Sheffield, who was

<sup>1</sup> *Selections from the Letters and Correspondence of Sir James Bland Burges*, edited by James Hutton, 1885, pp. 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, ii, 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> Stanhope's *Life of Pitt*, i, 237.

opposed to Pitt: "You must own that the fairness of his character, his eloquence, his application to business, and even his youth, must prepossess at least the ignorant in his favour."<sup>1</sup> Finally, we have Lord Sheffield's testimony, in a letter written at the time, to the pleasure with which Gibbon met Pitt at a country house in 1793.<sup>2</sup>

Is it then to be believed that a man of Gibbon's coolness and social address should at the age of forty-three be argued out of his self-possession by a youth, however able, of twenty-one; should have brought this on himself by "fashionable levities of political doctrine" of which there is no other trace; should then exhibit his discomfiture in the most childish and ill-bred way, leaving the room and the house in "high dudgeon," despite the appeals of one of his most intimate friends; and yet should afterwards repeatedly extol that youth in his correspondence to people prejudiced against him, finally expressing his great gratification at a later meeting?<sup>3</sup> That Gibbon should finally forgive the genial Lord North for not more fully rewarding him is quite intelligible in a man of his commonly reputed temper. That a man charged with morbid and unseemly self-love should, while so chargeable, forgive the man who put him to open shame, is a contradiction in terms. It is by a good many degrees more reasonable to hold that Sir J. B. Burges, writing in his old age, thirty-eight years after date, either made a bad mistake as to persons or availed himself of an imaginative memory. Concerning the memoirist we have his friendly biographer's

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, ii, 127.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 398, note.

<sup>3</sup> Sir J. B. Burges's biographer, quoting the letter to Lord Eliot, suggests that "very possibly" Gibbon had "forgotten his passage of words with Pitt in Lincoln's Inn." Gibbon's memory was not of that reticulous order.



avowal that after quitting the Foreign Office in 1795 he "applied himself to literary pursuits with moderate success"; that his literary friends do not appear to have been "men of any special merit or force of character," and that "vanity was to the last his besetting weakness."<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Croker written in 1810<sup>2</sup> he brags of his early intimacy with Pitt, saying that they were "young men together in Lincoln's Inn" in 1780, but says not a word of the Gibbon episode. For the rest, his reminiscences of his early youth are at several points quite too remarkable to be convincing.<sup>3</sup>

The story, again, that Gibbon once got down on his knees to declare his love to a lady, and was unable from his corpulence to get up again until assisted by her footmen or maids, seems to be one of those that get told of any suitable personage until usage fixes them to a famous name. Brougham told it of Gibbon and Suzanne Curchod, his first love, who afterwards became Madame Necker: of her it is certainly untrue, for she returned his love, and their episode occurred in his youth. Madame de Genlis told the story in connection with Madame de Crousaz, afterwards Madame de Montolieu, who indignantly denied it. Finally the lady was declared to be Lady Elizabeth Foster (*née* Hervey), afterwards Duchess of Devonshire; this story being told a generation afterwards by two writers, one of whom said he had it from the Duchess. We may be permitted to regard it as a time-elaborated myth.<sup>4</sup> It is not unlikely to have

<sup>1</sup> Work cited, pref. and p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* p. 310.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular his stories of his interview with the Pope, pp. 40-42.

<sup>4</sup> The story is given in all its forms by General Meredith Read, *Historic Studies*, vol. ii, ch. 134. Cp. Mr. Prothero's note to the *Private Letters*, ii, 154.

been evolved from the fact that Gibbon actually did, only a year before his death, go through a sportive ceremony of kneeling to and kissing the hand of the then Duchess of Devonshire, in the presence of Lady Elizabeth Foster. It was a playful ceremony of knighthood, in which Gibbon swore loyalty for his "adopted son," Wilhelm de Severy, to whom he tells the story in a letter<sup>1</sup> with no hint of any difficulty about rising after kneeling. *Requiescat.*

## XIV.

The famous episode with Mdlle. Curchod, in turn, is in no way to Gibbon's discredit. That he "sighed as a lover and obeyed as a son" is indeed one of the proofs that, after boyhood, he was never carried out of himself by a magnanimous passion; but he broke neither his own word nor the lady's heart. Whoso will may read the very complicated story of her relations with the young Gibbon in the faithfully voluminous record of the late General Read, where is cited the memorable letter,<sup>2</sup> so happily preserved, in which she records for us how the young student, not yet deformed in face, appeared to a young woman, herself the beauty of her circle:—

He has beautiful hair, pretty hands, and the look of a well-bred man. His face is so singular and full of mind that I know no one who is like him. It is so expressive that there is always something new in it. His gestures are so apt that they add greatly to his conversation: in a word, he is one of those very extraordinary countenances that one never tires of examining, depicting, and copying. He understands the deference which is due to women. His manners are easy

<sup>1</sup> Dated October 12th, 1792; given by General Read, ii, 497.

<sup>2</sup> Printed by the Comte d'Haussonville, in *Le Salon de Madame Necker*. I copy the translation of General Read, ii, 329.

without being too familiar. He dances moderately well. In a word, I find that he has few of those mannerisms which are the appanage of the fop. His wit varies immensely.

Alas for the course of true love! With all her cleverness, the brilliant Suzanne did not clearly know her own mind until her first stipulations as to his obtaining his father's consent and settling down at Lausanne had upset everything. At this stage she was keeping another offer on hand; was indeed actually engaged to a wealthy aristocrat two years before her engagement with Gibbon was broken; but at intervals she wrote him, sometimes beseechingly, sometimes angrily, he replying with perturbation; till at length she married the great M. Necker, settled down into normal happiness, and immediately became, with her husband, Gibbon's very good friend. In his closing years she writes to him with an affection which rounds their story in a pathetic peace. In the last year of all she tells him how she has been reviewing their lives in long flashes of memory: "You were for me," she says, "at once twenty years old, and fifty: far away from you, the different places I have inhabited are nothing more than the milestones of my life."<sup>1</sup> A less frustrate love might have worn less beautifully well.

No one, of course, can resist speculating as to what Gibbon's life might have been had he married this captivating and gifted woman, the only one he was ever seriously minded to wed. "Nature endowed you," he writes to her in 1761, "with a beauty which would soften a tyrant and inflame an anchorite; she united with it that happy gift of pleasing which she

<sup>1</sup> Letter in third vol. of *Miscellaneous Works*, orig. ed. p. 662. General Read, it should be noted, has misunderstood the passage cited, which he translates (ii, 345) "you were mine at twenty years of age as well as fifty."

only distributes to a small number of favourites, and which art vainly attempts to imitate."<sup>1</sup> General Meredith Read, a good Christian who nevertheless cherished for Gibbon's memory an affectionate respect, has found and shown that after the match with Mdlle. Curchod was broken off, Gibbon adopted and acted upon the bachelor views of love and marriage current in his class on the Continent in his day and ours.<sup>2</sup> Quite sure of his judgment on all such matters, as on the verity of the Christian religion, the General writes :—

For the sake of Gibbon and the world at large it was a great misfortune that he did not marry Suzanne Curchod. Her beauty, her intellectual endowments, would have rendered him happy, while the elevation and purity of her character and her deep religious nature would have moulded him in spiritual directions. Having failed to attain and enjoy this beneficent influence, he soon fell into habits of an easy-going philosophy. He was a red-haired man, a man of excitability of sense rather than of enduring passion. The temperament of Gibbon as shown by his hair has never been taken into consideration. Its coarseness of fibre belonged to a sensual organisation, not over-refined and destitute of nervousness. In George Deyverdun he found a congenial companion, whose nature was even more indolent and easy-going than his own."<sup>3</sup>

To some of us, ourselves dark, it is far from clear why sensuality should be supposed to be a speciality of people with red hair, coarse or fine; and still less clear how, granting this to be so, Mdlle. Curchod, who thought Gibbon's hair beautiful, could be trusted to alter his character. It would be rash to deny that she might have made him "nervous"; but when the good General further reasons<sup>4</sup> that

<sup>1</sup> Translation of General Read, ii, 334. The letter had not before been published.

<sup>2</sup> Letter in Read, ii, 354.

<sup>3</sup> *Historic Studies*, ii, 348.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 285

If Gibbon had married Mdlle. Curchod he might have left the world under a greater debt of gratitude. He might have aided the weak to solve their religious difficulties and to believe in eternal life—that is to say, in Christianity,

we must put his simple philosophy gently but firmly aside. The Christian religion is hardly to be saved by marrying a charming young woman to a fatally red-haired historian. Gibbon's contemporary, Dr. Samuel Johnson, did not manage to save it, though he seems to have been at once sensual and pious, and had apparently no hair to speak of; and his bibulous biographer Boswell, whose piety would hardly permit him to speak of Gibbon without a snarl, was not turned into a successful champion or specimen of his faith by an excellent wife. The General's own pages show, finally, that Madame Necker, already seen to be not exactly the wisest of her sex, was not ascetically truthful; and that, after all, is a fault, like coarse red hair,<sup>1</sup> even if the lady were a sincere Christian—a circumstance which General Read took for granted in the case of Suzanne Curchod with small justification. Not only does she never write to Gibbon as a believing Christian (her phrases are purely deistic), but she was, as General Read knew and showed, the warm friend of the deist Buffon and the correspondent of Voltaire.<sup>2</sup>

Concerning a man's temperament, in this regard, there is little to be said with profit; but the student of Gibbon must reckon with the frequent reproach, sometimes very indignantly phrased, cast on him for

<sup>1</sup> See, on pp. 344-5 of vol. ii. of the *Historic Studies*, Madame Necker's and Gibbon's very different accounts of her views on the subject of wealth. It is to be feared that we must accept Gibbon's circumstantial story, which is not hostile, though not very loyal.

<sup>2</sup> Though she did not want to have it known. See her letter to the Kiehl editors of Voltaire's works, given in translation by General Read, ii, 490-1.

his proneness to *grivoiserie* in the History. Emerson privately put the charge with unwonted violence:—

All previous and contemporary British historians [he first avowed] are bare-footed friars in comparison with Gibbon. He was an admirable student, a tremendous worker. He banished himself to a lonely chateau, just to work harder; but he thought uncleanly. He had—as also did Aristophanes, whom I never could read on that account—an imagination degraded and never assoiled, a low wit like that which defaces outbuildings. He was a disordered and coarse spirit, a mind without a shrine, but a great example of diligence and antidote to laziness.<sup>1</sup>

A little earlier in the same record, the sage is cited as saying: “Remember, all criticism dealing with isolated points is superficial.” He apparently applied that maxim at his convenience; for Gibbon’s leaning to impropriety affects only a small part of his work. The phrase “a low wit like that which defaces outbuildings” is a gross violence, recoiling on itself. There is in fact a certain want of balance in Emerson’s attitude on such matters, which is notable again in his censorious references to *Faust*; and seeing that at times, indeed in most of his writings, he holds a much more even tone,<sup>2</sup> we may suspect that he had a particular measure for the men he did not like. Carlyle’s taste in the matter of risky anecdotes is sometimes pretty broad; but Emerson forgives him, as he ostensibly does Shakespeare and Montaigne, though the latter can in his breezier way be fully as *gaulois* as Gibbon.

We must take Gibbon in the light of average male nature, and of the literary taste of his time; and

<sup>1</sup> *Talks with Ralph Waldo Emerson*, by C. J. Woodbury, 1890, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> I have said of him elsewhere that “he was always something of a Greek, composed in the presence of the primary human instincts,” and this holds good of his essays in general.

though he is not finally to be whitewashed he is not rationally to be spoken of in Emerson's hypermoral manner. Mr. Morison is specially indignant with him for giving in the Greek a desperate story of Procopius about the empress Theodora ; but as usual Mr. Morison is unjudicial. It is true that the tale is fairly to be doubted as told against Theodora ; though Dr. Bury, a much cooler critic, and one not unfavourable to Theodora, does not treat it as clearly false ; but it remains a human document on Byzantine life, and to call the citation of it a " licentious note " is one of Mr. Morison's many misjudgments. There are, indeed, some distinctly gratuitous *grivoiseries* in Gibbon to which that epithet might be fairly applied ; and we can but say, finally, that his bias was a perversity, though really not the worst a historian can show. It is one of the anomalies of average English ethics that Englishmen will forgive cruelty and massacre (Mr. Morison does not blench at the worst deed of Charlemagne, and he extolled the persecuting and crusade-mongering St. Bernard), while they shriek at the simple bad taste which obtrudes allusions to the sexual life. " Morality " has come to be so defined that Carlyle's condonation of the partition of Poland is never mentioned as immoral, while Gibbon is so branded for quoting in Greek a tale of Christian vice.

Personally, I should be disposed to say that he shows worse taste in one of the suppressed passages in his Autobiography than anywhere in the History. The anxiety he shows to leave it on record, by a significant turn of phrase, that he enjoyed the favours of Madame Bontemps<sup>1</sup> seems to be of the low order

<sup>1</sup> Memoirs B and C, pp. 204-5, 263.

of infirmity that kisses and tells. We are on his weak side, again, when we find him denouncing in the context the "intolerant zeal of the philosophers and encyclopedists" who "preached the tenets of atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists," and going on to tell how Madame Bontemps was "a devotee untainted with religious gall," and that at Paris he attended her in his carriage "to the sermons of the most popular preachers." "Fourteen weeks," he sums up, "stole away in the enchantment of Paris; and had I been independent and rich I should have prolonged, and perhaps perpetuated, my stay." *Le pauvre bonhomme!*

One other and earlier escapade will doubtless be readily forgiven him by British taste, which has so long condoned the potations of Addison and Pitt, though it loves to magnify those of Paine. One of the restored passages of the Autobiography tells how, in his second residence at Lausanne (1763-64), "the habits of the militia and the example of my countrymen betrayed me into some riotous acts of intemperance, and before my departure I had deservedly forfeited the public opinion which had been acquired by the virtues of my better days."<sup>1</sup> This humble confession apparently exaggerates the case: it does not appear that he was ever seriously discredited at Lausanne. But it is chastening to realise that the greatest historian of modern Europe could on occasion "paint the town red" at the age of twenty-six, two years after he had undertaken authorship.

## XV.

Chastening in another sense is the survey of the last chapter in Gibbon's intellectual history. He had

<sup>1</sup> Memoir B, p. 208.



reached in 1788 the end of his great task, that historic consummation of which he speaks so impressively in his Autobiography, so unimpressively in the preface to his fourth volume, simultaneously with which appeared the fifth and sixth. It was in the next year that there began the long convulsion of the French Revolution; and within the year he had begun to talk of it in the customary conservative manner.

In his latter years there had been no preparation on his part for a deeper judgment. It was only despair of further spoils of office, it would seem, that in 1783 had led him to cut loose from political life and settle down once more at Lausanne, in the companionship of his old friend Deyverdun. When, therefore, we note that the sale of less than half his mortgaged patrimony had enabled him to clear off embarrassments and enter on a quietly comfortable life of study and work, we realise how considerable had been the worldly factor in his plans for his life. The five years in which he wrote half his history might well be, as he in effect says, the happiest of his existence; and yet it had needed his political disappointment to drive him to his haven. The use he made of them was to complete his great work and to age rapidly from unwise habits. When poor Deyverdun in 1788 began to suffer from a series of apoplectic fits, Gibbon could see and deplore the folly of his friend's refusal to stint his wine-drinking; but he himself went on drinking his sweet Madeira, protesting that it was essential to both his health and his happiness; and after his friend's death his own sharply intensifying attacks of gout failed to serve him as an admonition. So gout and dropsy went hand in hand. Not to such a physique could come new moral wisdom.

When the load of the History was laid down,

twelve years after the issue of the first volume, he looked forward, as he tells us, first to recreation and then to new employment; and two years later he began, as cheerfully as might be after the loss of his friend, to scheme lighter tasks which were to occupy him and add to his fame without weighing heavily on his energy. Not very wisely, he planned to take as his first topic the history of the House of Brunswick,<sup>1</sup> though he knew no German; and whether from a sense of that disqualification or from the rapid growth of his infirmities, he produced no more than the jejune Italian section of his schemed treatise, which appears in the *Miscellaneous Works*. At the beginning of 1793, again, he writes to Lord Sheffield:—

I have long revolved in my mind another [*i.e.*, than the Autobiography] scheme of biographical writing: the lives, or rather the characters, of the most eminent persons in arts and arms, who have flourished in Britain from the reign of Henry VIII to the present age. This work, extensive as it may be, would be an amusement rather than a toil;<sup>2</sup>

and he begs his friend to sound, in an extremely artful manner, a leading firm of publishers as to their taking up the venture. But in the same letter he writes: "It is a serious truth that I am no longer ambitious of fame or money; that my habits of industry are much impaired; and that I have reduced my studies to be the loose amusement of my morning hours, the repetition of which will insensibly lead me to the last term of existence." Hence the idea of an engagement from which he "could not with honour recede."

In reality his work was done. Six months before his death he found in Pinkerton, the choleric Scotch

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the Librarian of Wolfenbüttel, given in full in the *Letters*, ii, 227-30.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, ii, 359.

scholar and historian, a competent conductor for a scheme he had long sought to set on foot, the publication in a worthy fashion of the whole body of original British historians. He accordingly drew up the prospectus, and he promised to himself another return to Lausanne—whence he had devotedly come to comfort his friend Sheffield on the death of his wife—there to read those historians in chronological order. But his friendly journey had hastened the development of his dropsy, so long and so strangely neglected; and he died on the very day appointed for the issue of the prospectus.

The last important aspect of Gibbon's mind, then, is his attitude to the French Revolution; and the criticism of it must be that he took the ordinary course of the commonplace British majority of his day. Like the most pretentious of their teachers, Burke, he treated the problem as if it were one of abstractly free volitions, in the very act of denouncing the revolutionists for their abstract ideas. "Are you not amazed," he writes<sup>1</sup> to Sheffield just after the fall of the Bastille—"are you not amazed at the French Revolution? They have the power, will they have the moderation to establish a good constitution?" That "they" is the keynote of the whole vast and idle outcry against the Revolution. The French people—an ill-coördinated multitude moved by a hundred forces of aspiration and self-defence, hope and fear—are treated as either a collective entity or at most two struggling entities; but never do the enemies of the Revolution give a sign of seeing that its harm was wrought more by the resistance of the old régime than by the reformers. As little do they

<sup>1</sup> July 22nd, 1789. *Letters*, ii, 198.

ever indicate that they know of the monstrous sequence of wrong, the sense of which first forced measures of reform on a besotted aristocracy, and later made the force which ground that aristocracy to pulp when its own effort to drown the reform in blood drove the long brutalised and now exasperated people to madness.

From Gibbon, beyond the avowal that "the abuses of the *court* and *government* call aloud for reformation,"<sup>1</sup> we never get a hint that millions of the French people had for ages endured abominable oppression. After all his survey of historic causation we get from him but a balder version of the declamation of Burke: "The French nation had a glorious opportunity, but *they* have abused and may lose their advantages." The "they" in due course become the revolutionists, who are charged, like the dog in the tale, with going mad to gain their private ends. Of the atrocious plots of the *noblesse*, who would gleefully have massacred far more of the revolutionists than were ever slain of themselves, we hear nothing. An immense complex of actions and reactions is treated as the work of the would-be reformers alone; and finally the barest desire for reform figures as a wholly devilish sentiment. All the while we feel that if the anti-revolutionists had succeeded in their plots and slain the people by myriads, Gibbon and his class would either have rejoiced, or wagged their heads in solemn repudiation of all sympathy with the victims.

As the plot thickens, Gibbon becomes more and more uncritical. "Poor Burke," he writes in 1791, "is the most eloquent and rational madman that I know. I love Fox's feelings, but I detest the political

<sup>1</sup> Letter of December 14th, 1789.

principles of the man, and of the party." Next year he "shuddered at Grey's motion [for an inquiry into the representative system], disliked the half-support of Fox, admired the firmness of Pitt's declaration, and excused the usual intemperance of Burke"; and he wildly protests to Sheffield: "If you admit the smallest and most specious change in your Parliamentary system you are lost."<sup>1</sup> A little later we hear from him of "the blackest demon in hell, the demon of democracy."<sup>2</sup> Such was the measure of the judgment of the great historian on the greatest historical event enacted under his own eyes.

The sophisticated Greek fable makes out that the appetite of love can turn men into lower animals; Circe, the Queen of Heaven, the bewitching Moon-Goddess, having been humbled by sophists to the mere spirit of sex. The fable is far astray. That wherein men truly approximate to brutes is not the appetite of love, which even in their vices they idealise, but the appetite of hate. Thereby alone are they truly animalised. Gibbon going to church in the carriage of Madame Bontemps is not an imposing spectacle, but it is decent and edifying in contrast with Gibbon turned by terror and rage into a blood-thirsty little bourgeois, screaming for the strangling of democracy. He is here but the type of the average Englishman of his day: shall we say, of ours? We know our ancestors from our contemporaries. Take the common citizen, cultured or untaught, from the plane of reasoned and bloodless debate with his fellows to that of tribal passion, and in a trice he is become one of Bellona's herd, seeing the world red,

<sup>1</sup> Letter of May 30th, 1792.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Lady \* \* \*, November 8th, 1792, in Sheffield's original collection.

as deaf to the science of his sane hours as any whooping savage. In the moral tempest of the French Revolution, political wisdom disappears from the average English consciousness. The very faculty of reflection is ousted by fury, and the higher capacities assimilate to the lower. Pitt dwindles from a far-seeing statesman into a tribal leader. The group of aristocrats who had sanely resisted the earlier and less overwhelming madness that warred upon the American colonies, become panic-stricken for their caste and their possessions; and in their cruel fear can think of no men's claims but their own. Political society becomes the analogue of a crowd in a burning building: the one instinct at work is that which tramples over bodies to security. Gibbon in that environment—the great historian reduced to the infuriated Anti-Jacobin; the artist of the vast drama of old Rome dwarfed to the condign comrade of the parish beadle—is one of the humiliations of humanity.

We can but turn away with a sigh from the spectacle of such power conjoined with such ineptitude; such grasp of the long mutation of the past, and such bewildered empiricism over a great transformation close at hand; such power to learn from books, and such blindness to the law implicit in things; such fervour of sympathy with the sufferings of a destroyed caste of oppressors, and such cold indifference to the long agony of half a nation. But we ourselves shall not have wrought out the problem until it comes home to us that the anomaly of Gibbon is just the anomaly of the race of man, wrought out afresh before us in every generation, nay, every hour. Most of his readers to-day are as ready as he to wax maudlin over an act of blood which strikes down the single head of a state, as callous as he to the vast cruelty of the

organised life and to the immeasurable crimes committed in the name of kings and nations. Perhaps we have learned a little from his work and from his case. There remains open at least the question whether we should say of him that it is hopeful to find such historic sagacity and personal good feeling possible to one so straitened of heart and brain on the civic side, or that that deformity turns to nought all hope based on the diffusion of historic light. Either way he constitutes for us a memorable item in that most interesting and most miserable of all spectacles—human nature. And it consists with that nature that we should be fain to rest finally on the memory of his achievement. A man is to be measured, let us say once more, by what he availed, not by his defect. It is in his variation from the norm that he becomes enduringly significant for his fellows. As sings the old poet :

Unless above himself he can  
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man !

Gibbon the historian has raised himself above Gibbon the man to a height at which he stands unrivalled, magistral, and beyond humiliation.

## MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

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It is one of the disappointments of literary history that no woman has yet written a quite worthy book on Mary Wollstonecraft. A woman ought to do it, unless it be a fallacy to suppose that, other things being equal, a woman can best understand a woman; and yet from women, relatively to what she has done for them, Mary Wollstonecraft has had less appreciation than from men. Neither from that side, however, has she been overpraised. Now and then she has been discussed by men and by women with both judgment and kindness; but it is surprising how often her case has fallen into the hands of men with too little of the spirit of justice, and of women with too little of the spirit of sympathy.

The difficulty is, to put it briefly, that she was a woman of unusual calibre as well as of unusual character; with greater power of thought as well as deeper power of feeling than was given to almost any of her women contemporaries; and that most of those who have undertaken to describe her have been concerned to establish rather their own superiority than hers. Something of this is due, perhaps, to the intellectual constriction of English life, still so hemmed in by convention and conformity, by the code of the parlour and the code of the pulpit. In France both men and women can do justice, and more than justice, to a woman like Madame Roland, who with all her



courage and energy was neither so fine nor so just a spirit as Mary Wollstonecraft. But in England a critic who should have ventured fifty years ago to speak for the Englishwoman as Sainte-Beuve spoke for the Frenchwoman would have been vilified as a person of bad morals ; and to this day, I suppose, an English authoress had need hesitate to write save with severe patronage or anxious disparagement of the authoress of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

This surely cannot go on for ever. Even in Anglo-Saxondom there are now readers who can discern a goodness beyond the reach of propriety and a wisdom beyond the scope of the newspaper moralist. Mary Wollstonecraft was a thinker ; and thought somehow lives down alike the censure and the patronage of mediocrity. The most recent study of her work<sup>1</sup> is by a woman student, and has been gone about with a thoroughness not exhibited in previous performances ; but it somewhat lacks the laying on of the hands of literary and moral inspiration. Thus the way is still quite open for the adequate, the worthy book. It should be written, one fancies, by a woman old enough to be past posing, declamation, moral cruelty, and nervousness, but young enough in heart to love sincerity. And she will have to be able to recognise original thought when she meets with it, and to judge of both form and matter by comparative tests, allowing for the antecedents and the environment.

Having thus cast upon the Woman of the Future the responsibility of doing Mary Wollstonecraft justice, I may callously add to the other insufficient estimates a brief account of how she strikes some males—for I trust I am not singular in my attitude.

<sup>1</sup> *A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft, etc.* By E. R. Clough. (Longmans & Co., 1898.)

As the special snare of the male in such a case is, I suppose, the tendency to credit too much to a fair face, I shall seek to ground my judgment primarily and mainly on her intellectual work, and to appraise that, not, as some of her women critics have done, in terms of the first impression it makes on a reader with a present-day outlook, but in relation to the literature of her own period. The story of her life is well enough known to make this fairly easy for anyone who realises that true criticism consists in such comparison, and is willing to take the trouble. She had a haphazard education, and, on her father's side, a bad heredity. He was wayward, passionate, thriftless, idle, and irresponsible. These are perhaps not the worst domestic conditions for the evolution of capacity;<sup>1</sup> indeed it is doubtful whether a good father, a normal education, and an easy life might not have kept Mary Wollstonecraft unknown to fame, and notable only to her friends as a clever and thoughtful woman. But the fashion in which her patronising editors belittle her for her disadvantages, instead of recognising the natural greatness of the powers which forced their way despite these, is trying to the critical sense. One writer after another has exclaimed—and the women are the most grittily censorious—at the faults of her style, as tried by the standards not of her day but of ours; seldom saying anything of its merits.

The faults are those of diffuse declamation and conventionally ambitious phrase. She read much, thought much, and was at all times full of feeling; and it is the constant play of intellectual and emotional life in

<sup>1</sup> She herself maintained, "without dreaming of a paradox, that an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife is in general the best mother." (*Rights of Woman*, 2nd ed. p. 59.)

her that drives her to the current vocabulary and the current phrase. She was too spontaneous, too abundantly overflowing with ideas, to stay to sift her terms. Thoroughly fastidious, in the best sense of the term, both physically and morally, she did not live and write long enough to develop the artist's fastidiousness of expression. Yet so easily does she find her words, so masterfully does she clothe her thought even in borrowed or conventional forms, and so surely does she attain cadence in every sentence, that any watchful craftsman, I think, will admit her to have had the makings of an admirable writer. As always happens, the faults are most salient where in her writing the utterance comes least directly from her heart—where she is least "intimate," or furthest from the centres of her gift. Thus her least skilfully written books are her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* and her stories. In fiction, her mastering didactic purpose inevitably withheld her from artistic poise; and in her work of historical philosophy, though its moral power and insight put it far above most attempts of the kind in that age or even in this, the difficulty of the subject and the lack of the due gestation prevent her attaining finish and individuality of expression. She wrote easily, and she had not only to live but partly to maintain her father, sisters, and brothers by her work; hence she did not brood out a masterpiece but threw off a rapid and eager sketch. When, however, she is penning in an intimate mood her observation of life, as in her *Letters on Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, even the occasional use of a diction which recalls the bad novels of the period cannot obscure the high literary faculty. In these letters, written under singular circumstances, there is an

alternation of feeling and reflection that makes them permanently interesting. Their author was at that time the unwedded wife of Gilbert Imlay, an American whom she met in Paris in 1793. By joint consent, they were not ecclesiastically married, though she believed their love would endure: indeed, it appears that they could not have been married at Paris at that time, since she, a British subject, could not go through the ceremony without declaring herself such, which would then have been a dangerous matter; and any other manner of marriage would have been invalid in England.<sup>1</sup> As it was, she would have been held married under the law of Scotland, inasmuch as Imlay openly called her his wife from the first, and designated her "Mary Imlay, my best friend and wife," in a legal document.

But, whatever be said of the forms, the realities went ill. Imlay entered on a course of speculation, and developed instability of character in other ways. Some other attachment grew up on his part in the second year of their union, while he was in London and Mary in Paris; and she already knew herself in some degree slighted when in 1795 she undertook on his behalf to go to Sweden and Norway, taking her child and a nurse with her, to see to affairs of his there which had been mismanaged. The letters, even as published, tell of a hurt heart, bearing up bravely in strange scenes, and fronting many hardships. To read them in the knowledge of all the circumstances is to realise what a rare spirit produced them. For happy people, travel in Scandinavia in those days was no simple matter: for a sorrowful woman, with her child and her nurse, going on her husband's business,

<sup>1</sup> Kegan Paul, *William Godwin, his Friends and Contemporaries*, 1876, i, 215.

it meant something heroic. And we can well understand the compliment paid to her by a Danish lieutenant who spoke English, in the remark that she "asked *men's* questions" on the life around her. Before Laing, no English traveller in those parts exhibits such a sociological insight as hers. The published letters, I think, were elaborated; but they are the work of a mind always energising, and of a better prose-writer than most even of the noted penmen of the time. In her book-making she began at the root of the matter: she had something to say. In her *Letter to Burke in Vindication of the Rights of Men*, no less than in her better known *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, her spontaneous feeling, playing in the sphere of her habitual observation and individual thought, gives her style a vibrating life that tells through all the flapping vocabulary, like the movement of a supple dancer in a cumbrous old costume. The high-bred Elizabethan women, probably, moved gracefully enough in their fardingales to the eye of the gentlemen of their day; and the test of Mary Wollstonecraft's style is primarily the impression it made on good judges and open minds in her own time.

Godwin, we are told, was at first repelled by its laxities, but later recognised its strength. In point of fact she was a better writer than Godwin, who was at least as conventional as she, without her nervous intensity. Opening the *Political Justice* at haphazard one lights anywhere on some such sentence as: "In the third place, sincerity is in an eminent degree calculated to conduce to our intellectual improvement," and on series of thin commonplaces ponderously clothed. A thought which a newly felt phrasing might make significant is made vacuous by

sheer verbal inflation, as in the saying: "The period of bold and unrestricted communication is the period in which the materials of happiness ferment and germinate." Compare such writing, which is normal in Godwin, with an average sentence in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as this:—

Make the heart clean: let it expand and feel for all that is human, instead of being narrowed by selfish passions; and let the mind frequently contemplate subjects that exercise the understanding without heating the imagination, and artless modesty will give the finishing touches to the picture.

Or this:—

She who can discern the dawn of immortality in the streaks that shoot athwart the misty night of ignorance, promising a clearer day, will respect, as a sacred temple, the body that enshrines such an improvable soul.

Such prose has the essential qualities of fluidity and rhythm, which Godwin's lacks. But it is not merely with writers of her own day that she may be compared to her advantage; she is really a better writer than some of those who to-day are zealous to disparage her. Some of these, acridly protesting against her artificiality, are themselves conventional practitioners, full of machine-made phrase, with no cadence to redeem it. She wrote with a touch of formality in an age of artificial diction; they write at once artificially and awkwardly in an age abounding in natural and individual prose. Passing over a worse case, I am fain to make a stand over the strictures of Mrs. Fawcett, who has thought fit to safeguard the readers of her edition of the *Rights of Woman* in this fashion:—

The faults of the 'Vindication' as a literary work are *patent upon the face of it*. There is a want of order and system in it which may, perhaps, be attributed to the desultory

education of the writer.....A more important *blemish* to modern ears consists in the formal and frequently stilted language *in which the writer conveys her meaning*.....There are other faults in the book deeper than those of order and style, *which* are probably to be traced to a reaction against the school of ethics *which* proclaimed that appearances and decorum were ends in themselves *to be diligently sought for*. To this reaction may also, I believe, be attributed the errors of Mary Wollstonecraft's own life, and those of so many members of the circle *in which she moved*. In unravelling the curious tangle of relationships, intrigues, suicides and attempted suicides, of the remarkable group of *personalities* to whom Mary Wollstonecraft belonged, one is sickened for ever, as Mr. Matthew Arnold has said, of the subject of irregular relations.

The tautologies, the lapses, and the padding in these sentences are sufficiently indicated by the italics. The crudity of the judgments calls for more explicit comment. It is a hasty criticism which ascribes lack of system in a book to the desultory education of its writer. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is admitted by admirers to be very ill-arranged; and Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* is a much less organically sequent treatise than Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. But it is always the way in England to give lavish eulogy unto him that hath had too much, and apply detraction to those who have been amply defamed. Mrs. Fawcett is lamentably loyal to the national convention; and as she is thus sure of the applause of the solid majority, whatever be her views on woman suffrage, there is no undue severity, I trust, in the process of indicating her commonplace injustice.

In the manner of the Philistinism from which Arnold was so imperfectly alienated, she proceeds to charge upon what she calls "irregular relations," and on the "circle" of Mary Wollstonecraft, certain

suicides which took place long after Mary Wollstonecraft's death. The suicide of Fanny Godwin had nothing to do with any "irregular relationship"; unless we are to assume that all suicides by women are so caused. Harriet Westbrook was legally married to Shelley; and he left her. Mary Godwin he did not leave. It is a very trivial sophism to connect Mary Wollstonecraft's attempted suicide with her views on marriage. There is not the slightest reason to doubt that she would have acted in exactly the same fashion had she been married to Imlay in a Trinitarian Church, with all the mummeries insisted on by Mrs. Fawcett's class. Mary Wollstonecraft had seen her sister Eliza married to a man whom she had to leave; and in many another "Christian" home she had seen marriage "fail" miserably enough.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of married women are betrayed or deserted by their husbands every year; but Mrs. Fawcett does not see in that state of things any argument against the institution of marriage. It is only when a stone is to be cast at reason and courage that such dialectic is sanctified. The married lives of John Wesley and of Coleridge, and the first marriage of Milton, were sorry failures; the union of the Carlyles was one of chronic friction; and Milton's upbringing of his daughters was a moral cruelty; yet Philistia, male and female, has no scorn for these breakdowns. But because Mary Wollstonecraft, as pure-minded and scrupulous a woman as ever breathed, acted loyally on a moral principle as deliberately held, and certainly as sane, as Milton's doctrine of divorce, she is decried

<sup>1</sup> She was not encouraged to alter her view by what she saw of married life either in Catholic France or in the Protestant countries of the North of Europe. See the *Letters from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, iv, xvi, xix, xx (Morley's ed. pp. 37, 138, 157, 161).



to the fifth generation by men and women who suppose themselves to deserve the name of Liberals. What does Mrs. Fawcett think, I wonder, of the spirit of Mr. Arnold's attitude towards "irregular relationships" in his last poem to "Marguerite," or of his ostentatious tribute to George Sand? Is it that nothing succeeds like success?

There is no saying what in particular will "sicken" some people in the way of "errors of life." I heard during the South African War of a lady of Mrs. Fawcett's way of thinking on morals and politics, who was all for the war, and would have liked to circulate Sir Percy Fitzpatrick's book broadcast, by way of promoting what she held to be sound politics. Women who are thus capable of joining hands with some of the worst passions of mankind, participating in reckless calumny and foolish hate, taking comfort in carnage and hounding on senseless men to new iniquity, can complacently profess to draw their skirts aside from the life of a woman whose one serious "error" was a too intense sensibility, and who was as incapable of their wholesale malignity as of highway robbery. Once for all, let me say, by way of putting on record the view of some at least of the minority, that this was a woman the latchet of whose shoe they might fitly count it no dishonour to unloose.

The essential principles of right and wrong in her case being thus vindicated, I must proceed to admit that she was not repulsively perfect. Her sister, Mrs. Bishop—"poor uncomfortable Bess"—was a fool and something of a vixen; but that did not quite justify Mary in telling her once, with a quite stupid harshness—that kind of hard rudeness into which sensitive people sometimes lapse, perhaps, from sheer nervousness

—that she would be glad to help her but could not have her in the house. At the time of that writing, certainly, she was in sore trouble. On the other hand, in her correspondence with Godwin after their marriage, she showed quite enough temper over the “icy philosophy” of his letters to reassure those male sociologists who fear that equality may make women unduly philosophic. But these and other such minor deviations from her own ideal are the only ones I have noted in her life that come under the heading of positive faults. The fact is that she and her sisters were all highly-strung women, with a heredity of neurosis from a highly neurotic father, and their reactions were at all times excessive.<sup>1</sup> Her friend and benefactor, the publisher Johnson, to whose house in her London days of literary work she often went for society, tells that “she was incapable of disguise. Whatever was the state of her mind, it appeared when she entered.....When harassed, which was very often the case, she was relieved by unbosoming herself, and generally returned home calm, frequently in spirits.”<sup>2</sup> The same kind helper, who gave her the lead to literary work which ended in giving permanent interest to her name, tells briefly what she did for her family. His short note is a main document for her biography:—

She entered upon her house in George Street at Michaelmas 1787, and continued there till Michaelmas 1791. Here she wrote her *Rights of Woman*. A translation from the Dutch of *Young Grandison* was put into her hands, which she almost re-wrote. She translated *Necker on Religious Opinions*, compiled the *French Reader*, introducing some original pieces, and prefixed a preface to it. She began a

<sup>1</sup> Mary tells in one letter how her sister, while riding in a coach, “bit her wedding ring all to pieces” (Kegan Paul, i, 169).

<sup>2</sup> Kegan Paul, as cited, i, 194.

novel under the title of the *Cave of Fancy*, wrote many articles in the *Analytical Review*—*Answer to Burke, Elements of Morality, from the German*, which she first studied here, and a translation of Lavater's *Physiognomy* from the French.

Her brothers and sisters were occasionally with her when they were unsettled. Hers was their home, and she took every method to improve and prepare them for respectable situations. She consulted with Mr. Barlow on the probability of getting a farm in America for Charles [a scapegrace, who did well with her help] which was determined upon, and he was placed with a farmer here for instruction. He left England the latter end of 1792. James, who had been at sea, was sent to Woolwich for a few months to be under Mr. Bonnycastle, and afterwards on board Lord Hood's fleet as a midshipman, where he was presently made a lieutenant. Much of the instruction which all of them obtained was under her own roof, and most if not all of the situations [as governesses] which her sisters had were procured by her exertions. In the beginning of 1788 she sent Everina to Paris for improvement in the language.....

In a part of this period, which certainly was the most active of her life, she had the care of her father's estate, which was attended with no little trouble to both of us. She could not during this time, I think, expend less than £200 on her brothers and sisters.

An active and nobly generous beneficence was indeed the chief law of her nature. All through her youth we find her sacrificing herself for others; furnishing a room for her friend Fanny Blood when that young lady—who finally had not the courage to go to it—craved for a place where she could be free from the distractions of her home; sailing to Lisbon to be with her again when she was married and expecting her confinement, whereof she died; writing a pamphlet to earn ten pounds to help Fanny's parents (of whom the man was a toper) to go to Dublin—always doing kind things, and only now and then, when nervously overwrought, failing to say them. It is difficult to express the moral superiority of such

a life to that of the parlour virtue which has been wont to asperse her.

In breaking down as she did under her great trial, seeking to end her life when her first husband fell away from their free union, she lays herself open to the charge of not being able to live up to her doctrine of free choice ; but thus to fail in fortitude is not to lack goodness or nobleness of character. It was on her return from her arduous journey, made on his behalf, that she found he no longer desired her companionship, but proposed to settle an annuity on her. "From you," she wrote, "I will not receive any more: I am not yet sufficiently humbled to depend on your beneficence." Once again he sought to patch the matter up ; but when she found he had set up an intrigue with her own maid, she turned away once for all. Imlay's unworthiness—for he lacked honour even to the extent of failing to provide for his child after undertaking to do so—perhaps did more to make her despair than her own sense of abandonment. And when, saved from her hardily planned suicide, she resumed her life, her rally was healthy and magnanimous enough. At all times she was apt to swing the whole length of the nervous pendulum. Frequently in the letters written in her twenties she talks of expecting speedy death. "I have been very unwell," she writes once ; "my constitution is much impaired; the prison walls are decaying, and the prisoner will ere long get free." Yet she always shrank from annihilation—the recoil being simply the spring of life within her. Therefore it was that she could resume her literary life for her child's sake, and, within a year of her leap from Putney Bridge, could marry her former friend Godwin. It is noted by Godwin that she neither vituperated Imlay nor

permitted others to do so in her presence ; here showing a greatness of mind of which probably few women would have been capable. He had had enough of idle good nature to repeat his offers of a money provision : but she firmly refused. " I want not such vulgar comfort, nor will I accept it. I never wanted but your heart : that gone, you have nothing more to give. Forgive me if I say that I shall consider any direct or indirect attempt to supply my necessities as an insult I have not merited, and as done rather out of tenderness for your own reputation than for me." For the child she left him to provide as he pleased. Then it was that he gave a bond for a sum to be settled on the child ; but " neither principal nor interest was ever paid." He was of another nature than hers. It does not appear that she ever gave him any kind of reason for turning away from her ; but after the first passionate scorn of his fickleness was past, she seems to have silently reasoned that on her own principles she was bound to let the death of love be the end of claim, and to cease to turn a grief into a grievance.

Thus from first to last she was a thinker, tossed at times by great and small storms of feeling, but always in the end subduing passion to the service of reason. The signal merit of her *Vindication* is that it is never the mere resentful protest of a woman who had suffered and seen her dear ones suffer from the odious conventions which at every turn hampered and degraded her sex, but a persistent trial of the case by the vital principles of individual and social well-being. To call her, as did the late Professor Morley, a " too faithful disciple of Rousseau," is a strange error. No one in her day exposed more effectively than she the irrationalities of Rousseau ; and at the same time no one saw more clearly or urged more wisely the

impossibility of sudden and violent social reform. That principle, blusterously turned by Burke to the vindication of all manner of prescriptive abuse, she rightly held as a guide to action, not as a veto upon it; and her reply to Burke's *Reflections* is to this day well worth reading for its swift eloquence and its keen home thrusts of criticism.

It was her gift to get at the essentials of her problems. Even Mrs. Fawcett concedes that there is no getting away from her comprehensive reasoning on the rights of women; and there is no defending Burke's angry sophistry from her exposures. I think they helped to inspire the more massive performance of Paine. Many readers have admired Paine's epigram on Burke's hollow panegyric of the suffering aristocracy and royalty of France: "he pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird"; but I have not seen it noted that in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letter to Burke in Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published in 1790, some months before the issue of Paine's *Rights of Man*, there occurs (p. 31) the phrase: "You seem to consider the poor as only the live stock of an estate, the feather of hereditary nobility." It is on record that when Godwin first met his future wife—it was before her union with Imlay—he was displeased because her flow of clever talk prevented any talk from Paine, who was in the company, and whom Godwin wished to hear. Paine, who may be trusted to have recognised genius when he met it, was probably listening to good purpose. It was not often so well worth his while. "She was one," wrote her daughter Mrs. Shelley, "whom all loved who had ever seen her. Many years are passed since that beating heart has been laid in the cold, still grave, but no one who has ever seen her speaks of her without enthusiastic

admiration." The young Southey, not yet turned Tory, writing from London to a friend in 1797, not long before her death, and just before her marriage with Godwin, lets us see the clever talker as she was in the fulness of her powers and of her experience :—

Of all the lions or *literati* I have seen here, Mary Imlay's countenance is the best, infinitely the best ; the only fault in it is an expression somewhat similar to what the prints of Horne Tooke display—an expression indicating superiority ; not haughtiness, nor sarcasm, in Mary Imlay, but still it is unpleasant. Her eyes are light brown ; and although the lid of one of them is affected by a little paralysis, they are the most meaning eyes I ever saw.

Perhaps the searching brown eyes had too consciously detected a certain inadequacy in Southey : in the portrait they seem kindly enough. But she had a right, be it noted, to some sense of superiority. Apparently none of her contemporaries, certainly not Burke, took deeper or broader views of life than the comely woman who, travelling alone in the Northern Europe of those days on the business of her unworthy and ungrateful husband, thus reflected on the spectacle of German conscripts drilling for war :—

I viewed with a mixture of pity and horror these beings training to be sold to slaughter or be slaughtered, and fell into an old reflection of mine, that it is the preservation of the species, not of individuals, which appears to be the design of Deity throughout the whole of Nature. Blossoms come forth only to be blighted ; fish lay their spawn where it will be devoured ; and what a large portion of the human race are born merely to be swept prematurely away ! Does not this waste of budding life emphatically assert that it is not men but Man whose preservation is so necessary to the completion of the grand plan of the universe ?

Here we have the basal idea of Darwinism clearly put, half a century before Darwin, by the woman of

“desultory education.” Her deism she doubtless owed to her books; for up till twenty-eight she had been an evangelical Christian;<sup>1</sup> but she held her doctrine in her own right, and thought about her world-theory as earnestly as she did about everything else. One or two sentences in her *Rights of Woman* may serve to show how incomparably more intellectual a creed was hers than the orthodoxy around her:—

The power of generalising ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations, is the only acquirement for an immortal being that really deserves the name of knowledge. Merely to observe without endeavouring to account for anything may (in a very incomplete manner) serve as the common sense of life; but where is the store laid up that is to clothe the soul when it leaves the body?

Such was the high way of thought of this clear-eyed woman, still so snubbed and patronised by those of her sex who, following complacently in the path she made for them, are conscious only of her inferiority to themselves. Before Browning, she “theised” in Browning’s way; but Browning in his brilliant poem on her<sup>2</sup> does not seem to have known much of her mind; and I cannot feel that he had the right thus to pose her as craving in her heart for the love of Fuseli when, as Mr. Kegan Paul has shown,<sup>3</sup> there is no valid evidence that she was enamoured as is alleged

<sup>1</sup> Letters of 1784, 1785, and 1787 in Kegan Paul’s *William Godwin, his Friends and Contemporaries*, 1876, i, 171, 174, 184–85, 188. In one of the letters from Norway (vii) she indicates her change of view in two sentences: “On the subject of religion they are likewise becoming tolerant at least, and perhaps have advanced a step further in freethinking. One writer has ventured to deny the divinity of Jesus Christ, and to question the necessity or utility of the Christian system, without being considered universally as a monster, which would have been the case a few years ago.”

<sup>2</sup> In *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day*.

<sup>3</sup> *William Godwin*, i, 206–7.



by the author of the anonymous *Defence*<sup>1</sup> and by Fuseli's biographer, and some evidence to the contrary. There is just a touch of indelicacy in such handling of a woman's memory. It sets forth as a consciously definite passion a mere unproved potentiality of inclination which her later life discards if it does not negate. In biography let guesses rank as guesses, not as revelations.<sup>2</sup> In the way of speculation concerning her capacity, however, one guess may be permitted. It is warrantable to say, I think, that had she survived many years longer, the life of Godwin would have been lived at a worthier level than that to which it ultimately declined. The years of miserable sponging upon Shelley which leave it a pitiable memory would never have been so lived in marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft.

Sometimes, by way of fanciful amendment on a heaven too dull to attract any thinking soul, one idly dreams of a civilised Valhalla, where there might congregate such persons of past time as seem worth resurrecting. It should, of course, have "many mansions"; and one of them, let us say, might be a place of resort for those remembered men and women whose heads and hearts were alike exceptionally good. I shall not seek to draw up the free list, lest I

<sup>1</sup> *A Defence of the Character and Conduct of the late Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin*, 1803, pp. 58-60.

<sup>2</sup> Another gratuitous guess is the remark of Professor Morley to the effect that, were it not for her "womanly feeling, in itself to be respected," about employing a woman rather than a man when she was in childbed, she would have survived with her child. Professor Morley has not paid proper attention to Mr. Kegan Paul's narrative. Not only was a doctor called in by the midwife as soon as the bad symptoms appeared, but he believed himself to have put everything right; and a second doctor, equally satisfied, spoke of the case as one which showed how well a trained midwife could manage. Mary Wollstonecraft died in childbed under the care of two doctors. It was the imperfect science of their day that was at fault, not the sex of her first attendant.

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be accused either of laxity or of fanaticism ; stipulating only that the respectable Hannah More should be provided for elsewhere, and that Mary Wollstonecraft should have the warmest of welcomes. In that tranquil Paradise, of course, there should be no falling in love : that would make trouble. But when she should chance to appear in any vista, fitly moving among trees or columns, with light step and flowing robe, the man who did not look her way with friendly eyes would thereby approve himself—well, better fitted for the grounds graced by Hannah More. And if the fair philosopher chanced to let fall her glove, and a man by way of tribute picked it up for her, perchance, being in Paradise, she could receive the homage without the warmth of indignation she once bestowed upon such actions on earth.



## INDEX

---

- ABAILARD, 2  
 Abbott, Dr. Edwin, on Bacon, 46, 57 sq.  
 Acton, Lord, on Machiavelli, 12, 28-29  
 Addison, 189, 190, 193, 196 *n.*, 227, 363  
 Ainsworth, Michael, 215  
 Alexander Severus, 316  
 Alfred, 337  
 Alison, 297  
 Allen, Grant, 271  
 Anton, Rev. P., 315 *n.*  
 Archimedes, 79  
 Aretino, 4, 5-6  
 Aristophanes, 197  
 Aristotle, 95, 110, 115-6, 148, 176, 197, 257  
 Arnold of Brescia, 2, 3  
 — Matthew, on Spinoza, 171, 178-9, 378, 380  
 Ashburton, Lady, 47-48  
 Ateukin, Greene's, 6  
 Athens, military evolution of, 23  
 Aubrey, John, 117, 118  
 Augustine, 19  
  
 BABÏS, 324  
 Bacon, Francis, on Machiavelli, 7; fame of, 42 sq.; his supposed authorship of Shakespeare's plays, 42; unjust aspersions upon, 51 sq., 61, 62 sq., 67-8; his real miscarriages, 52 sq., 70, 71 sq., 75; his legal judgments, 53-4; difficulties of his position, 54; his relations with Essex, 55 sq., 63 sq.; attitude on monopolies, 60; his alleged subserviency, 61; his alleged inculcation of duplicity, 63 sq.; his political problem, 67 sq.; his intellectual ideals, 71 sq.; his civics and his physics, 73; his treatment of mythology, 74; on atheism, 75-77; on science and theology, 77, 113-4; his imperfect training in science, 78 sq.; his curiosity, 82; his criticism of Gilbert, 83 sq.; his anti-Copernicanism, 84 sq.; his original insight, 88, 102; on the nature of colour, 89; on the nature of heat, 89 sq.; Spedding's claim for his method, 90 sq.; its fallacy, 91 sq.; errors in the *New Atlantis*, 92-3; his real achievements, 94 sq.; his literary genius, 96-104; his heredity, 97; his temperament and genius, 99 sq.; his portraits, 101; his duality, 104; his influence, 104 sq.; his political absolutism, 105 sq.; his Parliamentary wisdom, 62, 106; his ethics, 105, 257; his evil doctrine on war, 109 sq.; his economics, 110 *n.*; his views on Ireland, 112; his value for freethought, 112 sq.; compared to Hobbes, 124-5; Spinoza on, 170  
 — Roger, 95  
 Banier, 285  
 Barneveldt, 162  
 Baronius, 209 *n.*  
 Baumgarten, 226  
 Bayle, 280  
 Bentham, 27  
 Berkeley, 116, 148, 178, 188, 199-200, 201 *n.*, 227, 237-8, 248  
 Bishop, Mrs., 380-1  
 Blackmore, 193  
 Bletterie, De la, 284, 287  
 Blood, Fanny, 382  
 Blyenbergh, 167  
 Bodin, 7  
 Bochat, 285

- Boleyn, Anne, 7  
 Bolingbroke, 171, 188, 200 *n.*,  
 201, 203, 276  
 Bontemps, Madame, 362, 368  
 Borgia family, the, 1  
 — Cesare, 13, 17, 35  
 Bossuet, 315  
 Boswell, 360  
 Bowdler, 313 *n.*  
 Bradlaugh, 149, 179-80  
 Brahé, Tycho, 91  
 Breitinger, 286  
 Brown, "Estimate," 189, 197,  
 214, 221  
 Browning, 211, 212, 241, 263, 387  
 Bruno, 209 *n.*  
 Bryce, 331, 338  
 Buckingham, 53  
 Buckle, 28, 250 *n.*, 297, 333  
 Burges, Sir J. B., 353 sq.  
 Burghley, 61, 111  
 Burke, 297, 300, 366, 367, 368,  
 378, 385  
 Burlamacchi, 27  
 Burlamaqui, 131 *n.*  
 Burnet, Bishop, 271  
 — Dr. T., 315  
 Bury, Prof., 273, 285, 305, 310,  
 314, 328, 362  
 Butler, 188, 212, 222  
  
 CALVIN, 29, 30, 249  
 Cambridge, Cartesianism at, 88  
 Carlile, Richard, 313  
 Carlyle, 33-34, 108-9, 293-4,  
 331-2, 361  
 Castracani, 35  
 Cecil, 53, 106  
 Charlemagne, 335 sq.  
 Charles II., 138  
 Charron, 208  
 Chatham, 347  
 Chelsum, 308-9, 312  
 Christianity, rise of, 293, 302,  
 304 sq., 318, 319 sq.  
 Church, Dean, on Bacon, 46, 59, 70  
 Clarendon, 126, 137, 138, 271  
 Clement VII., 3, 20  
 Cobbett, 299  
 Cogan, 212  
 Coleridge, 142 *n.*, 149, 232 *n.*,  
 235, 291 sq., 297, 300, 344-5, 379  
 Collins, Anthony, 202, 353 *n.*  
 Colour, Bacon on law of, 89;  
 Hobbes on, 141  
 Comenius on Bacon, 104  
 Comines, 271  
 Comte, 27, 279, 280 *n.*, 326  
 Cooper, Maurice, 182  
 Cranfield, 53  
 Crevier, 286  
 Cromwell, Oliver, 7, 27, 133, 137,  
 347  
 — Thomas, 6  
 Crousaz, De, 201, 285  
 Cumberland, Bishop, 131, 134,  
 208, 213  
 — Richard, 353 *n.*  
 Curchod, Suzanne, 357 sq.  
  
 DANTE, 2-3, 19, 34, 345  
 Darwin on experiments, 99  
 Davis, 308-9, 312  
 Democritus, 176  
 De Morgan on Copernicanism, 86  
 Dennis, John, 190, 239, 240  
 Descartes, 77, 88, 96, 104, 117, 141,  
 161, 171, 209  
 Destutt de Tracy, 103, 104  
 Determinism, 166 sq., 248-9  
 Devonshire family, 116, 119, 125  
 Deyverdun, 359, 364  
 Diderot, 145, 188  
 Digges, 80  
 Diocletian, 340  
 Dionysius "the Areopagite," 209 *n.*  
 Dixon, Hepworth, 45-6  
 Dryden, 182, 187, 190, 192  
 Duff, Sir M. E. Grant, 304-5  
 Dyer, L., 37 *n.*, 41 *n.*  
  
 EBIONITES, 316  
 Eliot, Lord, 289 *n.*  
 Elizabeth, Queen, 106  
 Ellis, R. E., on Bacon, 78 sq., 96  
 Emerson, 241, 361  
 Erastianism, 145  
 Essex and Bacon, 46, 53, 55 sq., 61  
 Euclides of Megara, 209 *n.*  
 Evil, doctrine of, as *non-ens*, 204,  
 207, 209, 242; doctrine of, as  
 necessary correlative of good,  
 241 sq.  
  
 FALKLAND, 107, 126  
 Farrar, 318

- Fawcett, Mrs., 377 sq., 385  
 Federation, principle of, 19 sq.  
 Fénelon, 202  
 Fichte, J. H., 203  
 Finlay, 329-30, 331  
 Flaubert on Spinoza, 175  
 Florence, history of, 8-9, 22 sq., 26  
 Fowler, Dr., cited, 86 sq., 183, 193, 198, 222, 226  
 Fox, Charles, 350, 367, 368  
 — W. J., 212  
 Francis, St., 1  
 Fraser, Professor, 234 *n.*  
 Frederick the Great, 13, 41  
 Free-will, 166  
 French, the, in Italy, 15  
 Fréret, 284  
 Froissart, 271  
 Froude, 332
- GALILEO, 77, 90, 91, 94  
 Gardiner, Professor, 60, 299, 334  
 Genius, the co-efficients of, 32 sq.  
 Gentillet, 4  
 Germany, Machiavelli on, 26  
 Gesner, 286  
 Giannone, 285, 287  
 Gibbon, on Law and Mandeville, 242 *n.*; lasting fame of, 271 sq.; translations of, 272; educational influence of, 272-3; portraits of, 273; the *Autobiography*, 273; problem represented by, 273; heredity and upbringing, 274 sq.; at Oxford, 275 sq.; conversion and re-conversion, 276 sq.; character and temperament, 278 sq., 328 sq., 347, 357 sq.; style, 281, 296-300; early life at Lausanne, 281, 284; mental evolution, 280 sq., 286; nominal Protestantism, 282 sq.; first published work, 283, 290; debt to French scholarship, 284 sq.; youthful indiscretions, 286, 288, 363; militia experience, 288, 363; studies, 285, 288, 295; Parliamentary experience, 289, 348 sq.; view of history, 290 sq., 294-5, 334 sq.; genius for his task, 294 sq., 300-1; his plans, 301, 365; his discussion of the rise of Christianity, 293, 302, 304 sq., 318, 319 sq., 327; his limitation and strength, 302 sq., 328 sq.; his antagonists, 308 sq.; Macaulay's verdict on, 308; Morison's criticisms of, 278 sq., 319 sq., 335 sq., 339 sq., 349, 362; lack of enthusiasm, 328 sq., 333, 347; accuracy, 331, 334; on Charlemagne, 335 sq.; on the causes of Roman decadence, 291 sq., 339 sq., 342 sq.; political shortcomings, 347 sq., 366 sq.; later life at Lausanne, 353 sq., 363; relations with Pitt, 353 sq.; alleged love affair, 356; relations with Suzanne Curchod, 357 sq.; Emerson's attack, 361 sq.; Gibbon's *grivoiseries*, 362; his attitude to the French Revolution, 300, 364, 366 sq.; his greatness, 370  
 Gilbert, 83 sq., 91  
 Gizycki, 181 *n.*, 203  
 Gladstone, 211  
 Glossolalia, 320  
 Godwin, W., 376 sq., 381, 383, 388  
 — Fanny, 379  
 — Mary, 379, 385  
 Goethe, 108, 149, 178  
 Goldbach, 230 *n.*, 232 *n.*  
 Gracchi, the, 344  
 Green, J. R., 330-1  
 Greene, on Machiavelli, 5 sq., 40  
 Gregorovius, 337  
 Gregory of Nyssa, 209 *n.*  
 Grote, 297, 299, 332  
 Grotius, 104, 162, 213, 283  
 Guicciardini, cited, 21 sq., 24; style of, 34; diplomacy of, 37  
 Guizot, 272, 313 sq., 316, 332, 337
- HAILES, Lord, 309  
 Hallam, 3, 297, 299, 332, 337  
 Harrington on Hobbes, 145  
 — on Church establishments, 202  
 Harvey, Gabriel, 6, 101  
 Hatch, Rev. Mr., 187 *n.*  
 — Dr. Edwin, 318  
 Headlam, Rev. A. C., 306  
 Heath on Bacon's legal decisions, 54 *n.*

- Hegel, 149, 165, 320  
 Helvetius, 250 *n.*, 262  
 Herder on Shaftesbury, 181  
 Herodotus, 271  
 Hettner, 203  
 History, study of, 271 sq.  
 Hobbes, literary preparation of, 98, 126-7; Destutt de Tracy on, 105; character of, 115 sq.; portraits of, 116; bachelor life of, 116; birth and early life of, 117 sq.; schooling, 117; university life, 118; his later scholarship, 119; not a Baconian, 105, 119, 124-5; his line of development, 120 sq., 123, 124, 126; his attempts at a system, 121, 125; paradox of his positions, 122, 136, 208 *n.*; a pantheistic naturalist, 122; antipathetic to Laudians and Puritans alike, 123; his study of mathematics, 119, 125, 142; forced to study politics, 126; his earlier treatises, 126; evolution of his *Leviathan*, 126 sq., 175; its literary brilliance, 127; his mock-Scripturalism, 128-9, 131; his treatment of theism, 129 sq., 238; a non-theological moralist, 131, 132, 251; his relation to Cromwell, 133; his irony, 133 *n.*; his formula of the sovereign power, 134 sq., 213; his relation to Toryism, 136-8; his estimate of Salmasius and Milton, 137; hated by the clergy, 138, 144-5, 203; his *Behemoth*, 138-9; his reasoning power and his foibles, 139 sq.; his psychology, 140-1, 194 *n.*, 208 *n.*; his physics, 141; his old age and last writings, 143; traits of character, 144, 146; view of immortality, 144; his influence, 145; his literary attraction, 146, 194; Shaftesbury on, 217  
 Honorius, 342  
 Horne, R. H., 261  
 Howard, Catherine, 7  
 — Lord, 53  
 Hume, 283 *n.*, 303, 311, 315, 331; on Bacon, 87; politics of, 108; character of, 116, 148; ethics of, 212; on Mandeville, 259; vogue of, as historian, 272  
 Hutcheson, 187-8, 212, 213, 214, 239
- IDEAS, need for, in induction, 92  
 Imlay, 375, 379, 383  
 Imperialism, 224, 335 sq., 339 sq., 343 sq.  
 Islam, 322  
 Italy, Renaissance, politics of, 13 sq.; moral evolution of, 31; intellectual evolution of, 136
- JACOBI, 149, 163 *n.*  
 James I., 52, 62, 67, 101, 106, 107, 111, 113  
 Jeffery, 201 *n.*  
 Jellis, 163  
 Jesus, 198, 317, 321-2  
 John of Jandun, 2  
 — of Lancaster, 33  
 — of Salisbury, 94-5  
 — the Scot, 209 *n.*  
 Johnson, Dr., 33, 243, 248, 297, 298, 360  
 — the publisher, 381  
 Jonson, Ben, and Bacon, 100, 103 *n.*  
 Julian, 279, 326-8  
 Julius II., 15, 20
- KANT, 148-9, 188  
 Kepler, 78, 91, 94  
 King, Archbishop, 206 *n.*
- LAING, 376  
 Lamb, 189  
 Lando, 36  
 Lang, 271  
 Lappenberg, 337  
 La Rochefoucauld, 231, 251-2, 261  
 Laughter, 140-1  
 Law, W., 239, 242 *n.*  
 Lecky, 259  
 Le Clerc, 217  
 Lee, Sidney, on Bacon, 46-7, 62 sq.; 67 sq., 84 *n.*  
 Leibnitz, 77, 88, 104, 145, 187, 188, 200 *n.*, 201, 206-7

- Leicester, 53  
 Lessing, 149  
 Lewes, on Hobbes, 115 *n.*  
*Logos*, the, 321  
 Livy, 271  
 Locke, 145, 182, 183, 185, 190, 194, 211-12, 213, 214, 215 sq., 268, 286  
 Lucian, Shaftesbury on, 196  
 Lucretius, 148, 176  
 Luther, 108
- MABLY, Abbé de, 292, 293 *n.*, 335  
 Macaulay, 228, 293, 298, 299; on Machiavelli, 12, 13, 19, 23, 40; on Italian politics, 23; on Bacon, 43 sq., 51 sq., 55 sq., 94, 104; his intellectual character, 43-45, 47, 293, 308; on Shaftesbury, 183 *n.*, 184; on Mandeville, 263; on Gibbon, 308  
 McCulloch, 234 *n.*, 243, 247 *n.*  
 Machiavelli, ill fame of, 1-2; 4-6, 10, 265; inaugurator of modern political science, 2, 7; growth of his fame, 3; misrepresentation of, 4-6; references to, in Elizabethan literature, 4-7; translations of, 5; career of, 8; writes *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, 8-9; their aim, 9-10; his problem, 10, 18, 68; Spinoza on, 11; modern estimates of, 12; his teaching, 12 sq., 65-6; put upon the *Index*, 14; his ideals, 14; his training, 16; his view of the Papacy, 13, 17; his nationalism, 16, 20; merit of his *Discourses on Livy*, 17 sq.; his limitation of view, 18, 21, 345; his military prescriptions, 23 sq.; his theory of the effects of Christianity, 25; on Germany, 26, 37; on dangers of dominion, 26; his religion, 27; his *Florentine History*, 28, 35, 36; his ethic and influence, 28 sq.; his *Mandragola*, 30, 38; his essential greatness, 31, 260; his temperament, 31 sq.; his diction, 34; poetic idealism, 34-36; his *Life of Castruccio Castracani*, 35; his handling of history, 36; his diplomatic limitations, 36; his views on war and philology, 37; his death, 37-38; his rehabilitation, 38; general view of his character, 38-42  
 Mackintosh, 204 *n.*, 239 *n.*, 262  
 Malebranche, 181  
 Mallet, David, 276  
 Mallock, 246  
 Malthus, 234 *n.*, 243  
 Mandeville, on the Papal court, 14; on laughter, 141; ill fame of, 147; on Shaftesbury, 188, 222, 265, 269; style of, 189, 269; predecessors of, 214, 220, 221; humour of, 221, 235, 245, 269; relation of, to the Church, 222, 265 sq., 268; relation of, to Shaftesbury, 223, 236-7, 239, 251, 253, 254 sq., 267; his *Fable of the Bees*, 230 *n.*, 231, 232 sq., 240 sq., 245; birth and education, 231 sq.; hostility excited by, 234 sq., 236 sq., 239-40, 264, 269; his later writings, 235, 260, 263; his purpose, 236, 245; his special paradox, 240 sq., 245, 257 sq.; Whately on, 244; his treatment of poverty and charity, 246 sq., 264; his economics, 247; his plea for vegetarianism, 248; his character, 248, 264, 270; on free-will, 248 sq.; his plea for toleration, 249, 267-8; his utilitarianism, 250 sq., 253, 258 sq.; his views on language and society, 250; relation of, to Spinoza, 251; his analysis of morals, 254 sq.; his *Enquiry into the Origin of Honour*, 256 sq.; view of moral invention, 259; scientific spirit, 260; loss of vogue, 261; Mr. Lecky on, 259 sq., 261 sq.; Macaulay on, 263; his religious beliefs, 295 sq.; attitude to atheism, 269; views on art and on women, 269-70  
 Marcus Aurelius, 310 *n.*  
 Marlowe on Machiavelli, 5-6  
 Marshall, Prof., 103  
 Marsiglio of Padua, 2-3  
 Martin, T., 45



- Martineau, James, 149, 163, 165 *n.*,  
 209 *n.*  
 Mathematics, early English study  
 of, 119  
 Mayne, Dr. Jasper, 144, 147  
 Medici, the, 8-10  
 Melanchthon, 249  
 Memnonites, the, 160  
 Menzel, 337, 338  
 Mercenaries, employment of, 23  
 Merejkowski, 32-33  
 Merivale, 297  
 Mersenne, 125  
 Meyer, Edward, cited, 4 sq.  
 — Lucas, 162  
 Meynell, Mrs., 297  
 Middleton, 276, 303  
 Milan, history of, 15, 19, 23, 26 *n.*  
 Military virtues, the, 23-24  
 Mill, James, 243, 264, 297  
 — J. S., cited, 102, 237-8  
 Milman, 297, 309, 310 sq., 321, 329,  
 331  
 Milner, 308-9  
 Milton, 137, 190, 193, 241, 379  
 Minto, cited, 232, 233-4, 235, 243  
 Miracles, Bacon on, 113  
 — Spinoza on, 176  
 Mitford, Miss, 263  
 Mithraism, 324  
 Molesworth, 196  
 Mommsen, 332  
 Monarchism, dilemma of, 135  
 Monconys, 144  
 Monism, 172, 179  
 Montaigne, 181, 189, 191  
 Montesquieu, 7, 17, 28, 181, 283,  
 287, 291, 299, 335, 341, 345  
 More, Hannah, 389  
 — Henry, 208 *n.*  
 Morin, 337  
 Morison, J. Cotter, 277 sq., 280 *n.*,  
 289, 308, 319 sq., 328, 339 sq., 362  
 Morley, J., on Machiavelli, 12,  
 28-30  
 — Prof. H., 384  
 Mormons, 322, 324  
 Mornay, De, 318  
 Morone, 20  
 Morteira, 160  
 Mosheim, 311 *n.*  
 Motley, 332  
 Müller, Max, 218  
 Mystics, 320  
 NECKER, Madame. *See* Curchod,  
 Suzanne  
 Newman, J. H., 278 sq., 280, 299,  
 300  
 Newton and Newtonian doctrine,  
 88, 89, 141, 172  
 Nietzsche, 148  
 North, Lord, 68, 347, 349, 351  
 Novalis, 165  
 OPTIMISM, 204 sq., 210 sq., 254, 256  
 Otto, 337  
 Oxford University, 118, 275 sq.,  
 286  
 PAINE, 363, 385  
 Painting, purpose of, 226  
 Paley, 222  
 Papacy, the, 13, 17, 21 sq., 25  
 Pascal, 202, 287  
 Patericke, 4  
 Paul, 198, 322  
 Pavilliards, the, 276, 280, 281  
 Penn, Macaulay on, 45  
 Pescara, 20  
 Peter, 322  
 Petrarch, 5  
 Peyrère, 172  
 Pfanner, 315  
 Pilate, 29  
 Pinkerton, 365  
 Pisa and Florence, 22, 24, 26  
 Pitt, 353 sq., 363, 368, 369  
 Plato, 116, 148, 176  
 Plutarch, 85  
 Pollock, Sir F., cited, 145 *n.*  
 Poole, R. L., cited, 3  
 Pope, 44, 104, 171, 181, 188, 192,  
 200-2, 209, 211, 230, 242, 263  
 Porten, Mrs. Charlotte, 274,  
 276 *n.*, 286 *n.*  
 Positivism, 278-9  
 Priestley, 212, 263  
 Probus, 340  
 Puritanism, 123, 134, 146  
 RACINE, the younger, 201  
 Raleigh, 53  
 Rand, Dr., 228  
 Ranke, 331-2  
 Rapin, 190

- Rawley, Dr., on Bacon, 97  
 Read, Gen. Meredith, 273, 352 *n.*,  
 359  
 Rémusat, on Bacon, 97  
 Renan, 307  
 Reynolds, Sir Joshua, 273  
 — S. H., 51  
 Richard of St. Victor, 95  
 Robertson, Prof. G. Croom, cited,  
 121, 124, 134  
 — Principal, 272, 331, 335  
 Robinson, H. C., 222  
 Roland, Madame, 371  
 Roman Empire, decay of, 291 sq.,  
 339 sq.  
 Royal Society, 114, 161  
 Roscher, 247 *n.*  
 Rousseau, 384  
 Ruskin, 297  
 Rymer, 190
- SACHEVEREL, 224  
 Saint Bernard, 279  
 Sainte-Beuve, 372  
 Saisset, cited, 161 *n.*  
 Sallust, 271  
 Salmasius, 137  
 Savonarola, 8, 26  
 Schaller, 167  
 Schmidt, 336, 337  
 Scotland, universities of, in 18th  
 century, 275 *n.*  
 Seignobos, 337  
*Selimus*, Greene's, 6  
 Sforza, Caterina, 13  
 — the last, 20  
 Shaftesbury, first Earl, 69, 182, 199  
 Shaftesbury, the third Earl of,  
 relation of to Spinoza, 171,  
 207 sq.; influence of, 171, 181,  
 211 sq., 214; birth and training  
 of, 182 sq.; early political work,  
 183-4; ill health and marriage,  
 184-6; writings, 186-7; speedy  
 success, 187-9; later decay of  
 his reputation, 189 sq.; his  
 style, 189-94; his *Letter con-*  
*cerning Enthusiasm*, 194 sq.;  
 his self-discipline, 195 sq.; his  
 formula of "ridicule the test of  
 truth," 197; his view of Chris-  
 tianity, 198 sq.; his influence on  
 Bolingbroke and Pope, 200 sq.;  
 his prudence and his risks, 202;  
 causes of decline of his vogue,  
 203, 222-3; summary of his  
 philosophy, 204 sq.; its deriva-  
 tion, 206 sq.; its relation to that  
 of Leibnitz, 206; its sources in  
 Spinoza, 207 sq.; other clues,  
 208-9; his optimism, 209 sq.;  
 its contemporary success, 211  
 sq.; influence of on Hutcheson  
 and others, 212; his ethic, 213  
 sq.; relation of to Hobbes and  
 Locke, 213; criticism of Locke  
 by, 215 sq.; its errors, 218 sq.;  
 criticisms passed upon it, 221  
 sq.; his services, 223 sq.; his  
 sociology, 223; his politics, 224;  
 his æsthetics, 226 sq.; his sin-  
 cerity, 227; his Stoicism, 229  
 Shakespeare, 289; and Bacon,  
 42, 101, 102, 103 *n.*, 108;  
 Shaftesbury on, 190  
 Shaw, translation of Bacon by, 97  
 Sheffield, Lord, 273, 275 *n.*  
 Sidgwick, cited, 212  
 Sismondi, 337  
 Skelton, 251, 269  
 Slavery, 316  
 Smith, Adam, 230-1, 237, 239, 243,  
 276, 378  
 Socinianism, 249  
 Socrates, 176, 197  
 Sorbière, 124-5  
 Sortain, 45  
 Southcott, Joanna, 42  
 Southey, 386  
 Spedding, James, 43 sq., 47 sq.,  
 77 sq., 84 sq., 90 sq., 94, 96,  
 108, 111  
 Spencer, 28, 246  
 Spicker, 187 *n.*, 203  
 Spinoza, on Machiavelli, 11-12;  
 on prayer, 77 *n.*; character of,  
 116, 168; relation of to Hobbes,  
 145; renown of, 148 sq.;  
 heredity of, 149; treatment of,  
 by his race, 150 sq.; early life  
 of, 149 sq.; excommunication  
 of, 151; his culture and avoca-  
 tion, 152-3; early writings,  
 153, 155, 158; how helped, 153;  
 his love story, 154 sq.; his  
*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,

- 155, 171, 172 sq., 174-6; its success, 155-6, 176; his way of life and death, 156; his portrait, 157; his posthumous *Ethica*, 158; his *De Intellectus Emendatione*, 158-9; his "religious" feeling, 159, 238; impulses to freethinking, 159 sq.; sources of his philosophy, 161 sq.; his idea of love, 158, 162; his philosophic dividedness, 162, 163, 164, 166; his variations as to the God-idea, 163, 164, 173, 174; his philosophy really atheistic, 163-6; source of his inconsistency, 164, 166; his atheistic and determinist influence, 166 sq.; his view of pity, 168-9; of will, 169 sq.; his influence, 149, 171, 178, 179; his science, 172; his treatment of theology and Scripture, 172; his deepening naturalism, 176; his culture, 177; his *Tractatus Politicus*, 177-8; estimates of his work, 178; influence of, on Shaftesbury, 206, 207 sq.; optimism of, 206 sq., 209, 210
- Sprat, cited, 124-5
- Stephen, Sir L., cited, 234 n., 235 sq., 237, 243, 250, 258, 263-4
- Stilicho, 341
- Stoup, 155
- Strauss, 172
- Stubbs, Bishop, 332
- Swift, 193, 196 n., 225, 227, 248, 264
- Sympathy, analysis of, 147
- TACITUS, 271
- Tamburlaine*, Marlowe's, 6
- Taylor, Bishop, 266, 268
- Temple, Sir W., cited, 194 n.
- Templeman, 315
- Tennyson on Spedding, 47
- Texte, cited, 201 n.
- Thénard, 261
- Theodora, 362
- Thirlwall, 297, 331-2
- Thomas Aquinas, 148, 161 n.
- Karl, on Spinoza, 165 n.
- Thucydides, 271
- Tillemont, 284-5
- Tillotson, 266
- Tindal, 187
- Toland, 185, 186, 199 n., 255
- Turgot, 108
- Twofold truth, idea of, 173
- UTILITARIANISM, 213 sq., 250 sq., 253-4
- Universities, German, 230 n.
- VAN DEN ENDE, 152, 160
- daughter of, 154-5
- Van Vloten, 179
- Vegetius, 341
- Venice, history of, 23, 26
- Verri, 102
- Vico, 7, 27, 104
- Victoria, Queen, 68
- Villari, cited, 3 n., 13, 34, 35
- Virtue and vice, definitions of, 241, 243, 245, 253, 258 sq.
- Voltaire, 27, 197, 250 n., 272, 303, 314, 315 n., 335
- Vorstius, 107
- Vries, Simon de, 153
- WADDINGTON, Dean, 311
- Wallis, 142-3
- Walpole, 69
- War, Bacon on, 109 sq.
- the Thirty Years, 111
- Warburton, 201-2, 303
- Ward, Prof. A. W., 200 n., 234 n., 244-5 n.
- Warton, 200 n., 201 n.
- Watson, 272, 308, 312, 318
- Wenck, 313 sq., 316
- Wesley, 379
- Westbrook, Harriet, 379
- Whately, 244
- Whewell, on Bacon, 84 sq., 92, 95
- Whitaker, 308
- White, the priest, on immortality, 144
- Wightman and Legate, 108
- Williams, Bishop, 53
- Winchester School, 182
- Witt, John de, 153
- Wollstonecraft, Charles, 382
- Everina, 380, 382
- James, 382
- Mary, scant justice done to, 371; need for a juster

appreciation, 372 ; her heredity, 373 ; treatment of her by women, 373 ; her faults of style, 373 sq. ; counterbalancing merits, 374 ; occasion of her works, 374 ; marriage with Imlay, 375 ; Scandinavian journey, 375 ; her style compared with Godwin's, 376 ; worse faults of her censors, 377 sq. ; her constant generosity, 382 ; her relation to Imlay, 379, 383 sq. ; her impulsive tempera-

ment, 383 ; her intellectuality, 384 sq. ; her reply to Burke on the French Revolution, 385 ; Southey's estimate of, 386 ; a Darwinian before Darwin, 386 ; her religious development and deism, 387 ; Browning's poem, 387 ; relation to Fuseli, 387-8 ; her death, 388 ; her charm and vitality, 388 sq.

YELVERTON, 60





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96

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