

fierce, we used to go down to the morgue (which is just back of my ward) and look at the boys laid out in long rows. It beats any sight they ever had in France after a battle. An extra long barracks has been vacated for the use of the Morgue, and it would make any man sit up and take notice to walk down the long lines of dead soldiers all dressed and laid out in double rows. We have no relief here, you get up in the morning at 5.30 and work steady till about 9.30 P.M., sleep, then go at it again. Some of the men of course have been here all the time, and they are TIRED.

If this letter seems to be somewhat disconnected overlook it, for I have been called away from it a dozen times the last time just now by the Officer of the Day, who came in to tell me that they have not as yet found at any of the autopsies any case beyond the Red Hep. stage. It kills them before they get that far.

I dont wish you any hard luck Old Man but I do wish you were here for a while at least. Its more comfortable when one has a friend about. The men here are all good fellows, but I get so damned sick of Pneumonia that when I go to eat I want to find some fellow who will not "Talk Shop" but there aint none nohow. We eat it live it, sleep it,

and dream it, to say nothing of breathing it 16 hours a day. I would be very grateful indeed if you would drop me a line or two once in a while, and I will promise you that if you ever get into a fix like this, I will do the same for you.

Each man here gets a ward with about 150 beds, (Mine has 168) and has an Asst. Chief to boss him, and you can imagine what the paper work alone is—fierce—and the Govt. demands that all paper work be kept up in good shape. I have four day nurses and five night nurses (female) a ward-master, and four orderlies. So you can see that we are busy. I write this in piecemeal fashion. It may be a long time before I can get another letter to you, but will try.

This letter will give you an idea of the monthly report which has to be in Monday. I have mine most ready now. My Boss was in just now and gave me a lot more work to do so I will have to close this.

Good By old Pal,
"God be with you till we meet again"
Keep the Bouells open.
(Sgd) Roy.

Edward Gibbon's health

W D FOSTER

In *Creative Malady* Sir George Pickering made a persuasive case that, in certain circumstances, ill-health can be a positive advantage in creative work, but, by and large, sickness is a drag on achievement. The accomplishment of great work in the face of illness, therefore, is all the more to be admired. Edward Gibbon's terminal illness, with his gigantic hernia and hydrocele, have been written about on more than one occasion but it is not generally appreciated that he wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, still perhaps the greatest single work of historical scholarship in the English language, in the face of physical and psychological disabilities that would have destroyed a lesser man.

Gibbon was a sickly child, but this was of some advantage to him: it spared him the full rigours of Westminster School and allowed him to pursue his own desultory studies, which eventually settled in the historical line. As he tells us in his *Autobiography*, by the time he was 16 his constitution was "fortified and fixed," so that until he was "admonished by the gout . . . few persons have been more exempt from real or imaginary ills" than himself. But he was not being totally frank.

Gibbon had not been physically favoured by nature: he was not handsome, was very short, and, even as a youth, plump (in later life he was to become grossly fat). None the less, throughout his life he had all the sexual ardour of a normal man; as a young militia officer he had an eye for the girls and throughout his life he was a flirt. It is said that in middle age, having sunk to his knees before one beauty, he needed footmen to help him rise again because he was so fat. Yet it seems that, like John Wilkes, his fellow militia officer, given half an hour he could "talk away his face"; there is no doubt that women of all ages found him charming.

That he could as a boy win the heart of Susanne Curchod, one of the most attractive and intelligent girls in Lausanne, and, in middle age, the affection of Lord Sheffield's vivacious

daughters is but part of the evidence. "Wit I have none," confessed the young Gibbon, but his delightful, teasing, donnish sense of humour shines through the pages of his correspondence. Even so, Gibbon probably had cause to doubt



EDWARD GIBBON, ESQ.

whether he could achieve a normal sexual relationship with a woman, and even as a young man, must have thought it was psychologically and physically impossible. "I think I may venture to say I shall never marry," he wrote to his father at the age of 26, and he repeated his decision the following year ascribing it to his "constitution."

In 1761, in the midst of a busy, unfamiliar, and uncongenial

life as a captain of militia, Gibbon slipped up to London one day to consult a surgeon, Mr Caesar Hawkins, about a lump in his groin. Hawkins, who was surgeon to St George's Hospital and sergeant-surgeon to the King, was uncertain whether the trouble was the beginnings of a hernia or hydrocele and asked to see Gibbon again, but, "not feeling any pain, nor suffering any inconvenience," Gibbon "strangely neglected it for many years." By the time of his death the hernial sac, containing the colon and omentum, hung down nearly as low as the knee. Yet, although Gibbon kept a diary at this time, he makes no mention of his visit to Hawkins—the embarrassment of his affliction must have been there from the beginning and was to haunt him his whole life. His personal valet was forbidden ever to allude to the deformity and Gibbon never so much as mentioned his burden to his most intimate friend, Lord Sheffield, until a few weeks before his death; but by that time it had been obvious to the whole world for a decade. It had not prevented Gibbon living a full social life, for, despite his love of scholarly solitude, he was an intensely social animal; he loved to stand, his back to the fireplace, entertaining the assembled company with an amusing anecdote, while the ladies knew not where to look. To be able to blot out his deformity from his mind must have exacted a psychological price.

The ravages of drink

As a young militia officer Gibbon tended to despise his fellow "rustic officers," but nevertheless he joined them in their coarse amusements. It was in the militia that Gibbon learnt to drink hard; evenings of "bumperising" in the mess with the commanding officer "assuring us, every fresh bottle, how infinitely sober he was grown," and mornings when Gibbon could do nothing "but spew" were not uncommon. "A great deal too much wine," in Gibbon's estimate, was "near two bottles apiece," but he sometimes drank much more. When Gibbon went on his Grand Tour he exhibited a Jekyll and Hyde syndrome: the scholarly young man of fashion would change to one who, he confessed to his diary, was looked on "as a man who loves wine and dissipation" and who would, when outside a couple of bottles of wine, indulge in "unparalleled impudence" with the more permissive ladies of Lausanne. Thus early in life Gibbon became an alcoholic, and madeira and plenty of it soon became essential for his health. The sentence in his necropsy report "in hepate ingentem numerum parvorum tuberculorum" surely indicates that he suffered from cirrhosis.

If the militia taught Gibbon to drink, the life of a man of fashion—which he adopted on coming into his inheritance—gave him the gout. Gibbon suffered his first attack of gout towards the end of 1771 when he was aged 34; it was mild, and he doubted the diagnosis. But three years later he had a short-lived but definite attack in the left foot. Over a period of 20 years Gibbon suffered some dozen attacks of gout, usually during the winter months; he came to look on it as his "annual tax" and congratulated himself if he managed to avoid it. In November 1777 Gibbon had his first serious attack and suffered "like one of the first martyrs"—but admitted that he had probably provoked his punishment. He always accepted his gout with urbane good humour—the affliction of a gentleman, which he was almost proud to endure. Within 10 days he was able to report that his "generous enemy has disdained to abuse his victory and to torment any longer an unresisting victim . . . the swelling is so amazingly diminished that they (his feet) are no longer above twice their normal size. Yesterday I moved about the room with the laborious majesty of crutches; today I have exchanged them for a stick; and by the beginning of next week I hope, with due precaution, to take the air. . . ."

Within six weeks he was "once more engaged in the busy as well as the idle dissipation of this great town." 1783 was a bad year with no fewer than three separate attacks, and in September Gibbon, having lost his government sinecure and needing to

retrench financially, returned to Lausanne. The day after his arrival he twisted his ankle and his "old latent enemy (I do not mean the devil) who is always on the watch has made an ungenerous use of his advantage" and laid him low with gout for upwards of a month. Gibbon hoped that residence in Switzerland would benefit his gout; the disease was rare in that country and he had heard of but one gentleman who "by free living" got the disease by the age of 60. The dry, pure air of Switzerland was thought to be favourable to a "gouty constitution," but Gibbon was well aware of the virtue of the more abstemious way of living which could, with a little willpower, be practised in Lausanne. For 18 months his enemy did spare him, but in March 1785 Gibbon suffered a severe attack of gout which lasted into May; he was somewhat alarmed. "This admonition," he wrote, "calls for some extraordinary care and without running into extremes I consult both my reason and my taste by abstaining at night from wine and meat, and contenting myself with a basin of milk." But as the main meal of the day was in the afternoon and supper had usually been a light meal it is doubtful how much difference this made. On a visit to England in the winter of 1787 Gibbon suffered another severe attack.

Back in Lausanne Gibbon found that his supply of madeira which, he wrote, is "a credit to my table and a comfort to my health" was running low; Lord Sheffield was asked to get his wine merchant to send out a pipe (105 gallons) "that he can answer for." Gibbon suffered one more attack of gout and wrote to Sheffield that "in the month of February I was seized by such a fit of the gout as I had never known, though I must be thankful that its dire effects have been confined to the feet and knees without ascending to the more noble parts. With some vicissitudes of better and worse I have groaned between two and three months; the debility has survived the pain and, though now easy, I am carried about in my chair without any power and with a very distant chance of supporting myself from the extreme weakness and contraction of the joints of the knees."

In the same letter he lamented about his madeira, "If I do not receive a supply in the course of the summer, I shall be in great shame and distress." Even by August he was still much crippled and again complained that his "MADEIRA is almost exhausted." But his old enemy had done its worst and for the remaining three and a half years of his life Gibbon was not troubled by the gout.

Man of fashion

Gibbon always believed in patronising only the most fashionable medical practitioners. He did not deign to name his general practitioners, but would refer, at best, to "a sensible apothecary." At the consultant level, however, his correspondence contains comments on some of the most eminent doctors of his day. Gibbon's regular physician during his residence in London was Dr John Turton, a highly successful practitioner, who was physician to the King, Queen, and Prince of Wales. When he died Turton left £9000 a year in land as well as over £60 000 in funds. Gibbon thought him "young but very sensible."

In 1770 Gibbon consulted Dr Anthony Addington about his father (who was in congestive heart failure). Addington recommended "broom ashes" which "immediately produced a very great evacuation of water, reducing my father's legs and body to their normal size, and for a while gave us very great room for hope. . . ." Gibbon held a high opinion of Addington remarking that his "skill is I believe equal to his humanity," but he is chiefly remembered today as the father of a Prime Minister.

In 1788 Gibbon recommended his young friend Wilhelm de Severy to consult "Mr Farquhar, Great Marlborough Street" commenting "lequel sans être de la faculté a supplanté les medecins dans les premières maisons de Londres: pour lui et pour les drogues une guinée suffira tres bien." He was referring to Walter Farquhar, a Scottish military surgeon who had settled in London as an apothecary but "even in this subordinate

position his progress towards eminence was rapid." He became physician to the younger Pitt and the Prince of Wales, and was created a baronet but was never admitted FRCP, London. It was Farquhar whom Gibbon summoned in November 1793 for what proved to be the beginning of his terminal illness. Farquhar called into consultation Henry Cline, a surgeon "of the first eminence," at St Thomas's Hospital. Although Astley Cooper considered Cline somewhat deficient in industry and professional zeal, he none the less earned £10 000 a year.

During his residence in Lausanne, it is surprising that Gibbon did not employ Dr S A Tissot, a physician with an international reputation who had actually written books on the health problems of men of letters and gentlemen of fashion. Instead, he consulted for his gout an anonymous but "very conversable physician whose ordinary fee is ten batz, about fifteen pence English"—at that time the physician's consultation fee in London was a guinea.

Gibbon was always conscious of his good fortune to have been born in an enlightened age, in a free and democratic country, to a state of comfortable independence ("that first of earthly blessings") and to have learnt from an early age to delight in literature and scholarship. He conceived the idea of writing *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* while musing in the ruins of the Capitol as a young man of 27 (in 1764), although he did not begin serious work on his subject for a decade. He wrote the last lines of the last page in the summer house overlooking Lake Geneva in June 1787, and spent almost another year seeing the last volumes through the press. Through all these years of historical labour Gibbon was never really well—burdened physically and psychologically with a hernia growing ever more cumbersome, becoming increasingly obese, with a constitution undermined by alcoholism, and a martyr to the gout—it was against this background that the *Decline and Fall* was written. That a major part of his poor health was self-inflicted is clear and stemmed from an enormous vanity; not content, indeed offended, to be regarded as a man of letters, he insisted on undermining his constitution by playing the man of fashion. At the age of 53 he was already old and looked forward with apprehension to a lonely old age, despite many friends in Lausanne and the devotion of the Sheffield family in England.

His friend Deyverdun, whose house he shared, had died and Gibbon "sometimes in solitary mood" imagined himself married "to one or other of those whose society and conversation are most pleasing to me" but he knew in his heart that this was not possible. "Yet," he wrote, "I feel and shall continue to feel that domestic solitude, however it may be alleviated by the world, by study and even by friendship is a comfortless state which will grow more painful as I descend into the vale of years." He had a plan to adopt a young kinswoman, Charlotte Porten, "one of the most amiable, sensible young creatures I ever saw" whose "care and tenderness" he could reward with a "decent fortune." "She might either remain a spinster (the case is not without example) or marry some Swiss of my choice, who will increase and enliven our society; and both would have the strongest motives for kind and dutiful behaviour," he wrote. But this selfish and cold-blooded scheme came to nought; Charlotte's mother when "indirectly sounded," would not hear of it. Gibbon did, however, make Charlotte and her sister his heirs.

In April 1793 Gibbon learnt of the sudden death of the wife of his great friend Lord Sheffield, and, despite his poor state of health and the wide detour through Germany and Holland made necessary by the French Revolutionary wars, he immediately set out for England. He accomplished his journey in 23 days "without the smallest degree of difficulty or danger," although he could at one point hear the sound of guns at the siege of Mayence 20 miles away. He found Sheffield "much better and even more cheerful than I could have expected." Gibbon himself was not well; he had to cancel an engagement because he was in "such a state of mental and corporeal dissolution." After a brief spell in a hotel, and a visit to his step-mother in Bath, he took lodgings in St James's street.

On 8 November Gibbon reported himself "fatigued and rather unwell"; during the preceding six weeks the hydrocele which complicated his hernia had increased "most stupendously." Farquhar and Cline proposed to tap it but, thinking it a "most extraordinary case," wished to have the well-known physician Matthew Baillie, a nephew of the Hunters, present. The first operation was completely successful: four quarts of fluid were taken away and caused neither inflammation nor fever, and Gibbon carried on with his usual social life. His doctors took a sanguine view of the case and promised Gibbon "immediate relief" and "a safe and radical cure." But within 10 days, another tapping was required "much longer, more searching and more painful than the former." Gibbon was much relieved, his doctors were in no way alarmed, and he was "enjoying the best society in London." Christmas was spent at Sheffield Place where his talk was never more brilliant nor more entertaining. Returning to London he "was almost killed between Sheffield Place and East Grinstead by hard, frozen, long and cross ruts, that would disgrace the approach to an Indian wigwam" and arrived home "half-dead." The hydrocele was now larger than ever and the scrotum inflamed and ulcerated. It was tapped again on 13 January, when six quarts of fluid were removed. Still neither the doctors, Gibbon's friends, nor Gibbon himself were alarmed. At worst, Gibbon thought that if radical cure proved impossible he could return to Lausanne, as there was an able surgeon in Geneva who could come to tap him. As late as 14 January his doctors expressed no fears for his life. Twenty hours before his death Gibbon ate the wing of a chicken, drank three glasses of madeira, and said he thought himself good for ten, 12 perhaps 20 years. He expired at 12.45 pm on 16 January 1794.

In many ways death was a mercy; Gibbon had written two books, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and his *Autobiography*, which Lord Sheffield was to publish posthumously; both will continue to be enjoyed so long as the English language is read. On his own admission he had grown lazy, almost certainly he would have written no more, and he was spared increasing ill-health and the comfortless state of domestic solitude in old age which he so much feared.

Bibliographical note

The information on which this article is based is derived from three main sources: J E Norton *The letters of Edward Gibbon*, 3 volumes, London, Cassell, 1956; D M Low *Gibbon's Journal*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1929; and Lord Sheffield, *The miscellaneous works of Edward Gibbon Esq with memoirs of his life and writings composed by himself*, London, Blake 1837.

I am grateful to Mrs Anne Harrop for typing this paper.

VIRGINIBUS PUERISQUE What, then, should a boy destined for medicine learn before he begins his special studies at the age of 17 to 18 years? I should say that in addition to those subjects which are generally taught in schools he should have a thorough course of the English language and literature. This will do more to train his intellectual faculties and to give him a command of language, a vocabulary, a taste for good literature, and a culture far larger and better than he can obtain by acquiring an elementary knowledge of Latin which will be of no use to him, is too scrappy to be a source of intellectual enjoyment, and which will in a short time be forgotten. French and German should also be learned, and I believe the power of reading both languages with ease could be acquired in the time now devoted to learning Greek and Latin. A knowledge of these two modern languages is essential to a practitioner who is desirous of being among the leaders of his profession, for the work done in the laboratories and hospitals of France and of Germany is of such a high order that no one who is ignorant of it can be considered abreast of medical knowledge. (From the *British Medical Journal*, 1900.)