



STARTING A NEW PROJECT  
LINDA COLLEY

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Linda Colley, since 2003 the Shelby M.C. Davis 1958 Professor of History at Princeton University, is an expert on British, imperial, and global history since 1700. Born in Chester in 1949, she completed her Ph.D. in History at Cambridge University, and moved to Yale University in 1982, where she became a University Professor. Her first book, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party 1714–1760* (1982), challenged the then-dominant view by arguing that the Tory party remained active and influential during its years out of power. *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (1992) investigated how, and how far, inhabitants of England, Scotland, and Wales came to see themselves as British over the course of the 18th and early 19th centuries. *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850* (2002) used captivity narratives to investigate the underbelly and sporadic vulnerability of this empire and its makers. *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* (2007) pioneered the technique of using the life experiences of an individual to explore transnational and transcontinental histories. Her most recent book, *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen* (2021) explores how novel kinds of codified constitutions spread across continents after 1750 and how and why this development was closely connected with changes in the geography, cost, and nature of warfare. Linda Colley is a Fellow of the British Academy, the Royal Society of Literature, and the Academia Europaea, among other bodies. Address: Department of History, Princeton University, 129 Dickinson Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA. E-mail: lcolley@princeton.edu.

It was a great honour and privilege to be offered a fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin for the 2021/2022 academic year and enormously stimulating and exciting finally to take up and inhabit this opportunity.

In some few ways, to be sure, my time at Wiko did not proceed as I had anticipated. Because of a major operation on my foot, I was not able to come to Berlin till October 25, 2021. This meant that I had sadly to let go of some of my plans, especially devoting intensive time to improving my German. In common with everyone else at Wiko last year, my progress was also occasionally disrupted by COVID and its restrictions. This cut back on some of the intellectual encounters and visits that I had planned. More pleasurably, some of my time at Wiko was of necessity eaten up by the good aftershocks of my most recent book, *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World* (2021). I had to make minor alterations and additions for the UK paperback edition of this, which was issued in spring 2022. I took part in dozens of online debates/podcasts/interviews on the book for sites in the UK, India, Australia, Mexico, the USA, Canada, etc.; and I prepared long responses for a colloquium devoted to the book at the National History Center in Washington, D.C. and for the online legal history symposium, *Balkanization*. I also did a lengthy online interview in relation to a new Mandarin translation of an earlier book, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History*, which was issued in Taiwan this spring.

Given these commitments, I tried to keep live academic performances outside of Wiko to a minimum. But, along with the two talks I delivered there, I did also give the annual Foundation Lecture for Fitzwilliam College Cambridge in the autumn of 2021. In spring 2022, I delivered the Fourth Annual Wittrock Lecture at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies in Uppsala and the Annual Keynote Lecture for the Centre for British Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In addition, I gave the keynote lecture at a Conference on Constitutions and Crises organized around my book at Cambridge University, and I delivered a paper at the Global Constitutionalism seminar at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center.

During this academic year, I was made an Honorary Fellow of Harris Manchester College, Oxford University, and I was appointed a D.B.E. (Dame of the British Empire [sic]) for services to history in the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Award List in the UK.

Most of my time at Wiko, however, was devoted to reading both intensively and experimentally in order to give shape and substance to a new research project I had begun loosely to think about in advance of arriving here. The current working title of this project is *Decline and Fall and Rise: Edward Gibbon in the World*, and it is organized – though not exclusively – around the life, career, ideas, and writings of the historian of that name (1737–1794). At Wiko, I concentrated, to begin with, on the published primary

material on Gibbon, and on some of the major secondary analyses of his life and work by scholars such as J.G.A. Pocock and Glen Bowersock. Part of the reason I wanted to acquire a firm sense and control of this material – which is extensive – was to prepare myself for the detailed archival research I planned on (and am now) doing on my return to London this summer.

Looking at these different layers of evidence and commentary on Gibbon confirmed my early instinct that this was someone who to a marked degree hid in plain sight. His late-life memoirs, for instance, are avowedly frank and famous, one of the most notable exercises in life writing of the 18th century. But Gibbon wrote several different versions of these memoirs, and they all omit critical aspects of his life, from the range of his political interventions and alliances and his shifting and conflicted positions on slavery, to his own progressive and humiliating physical disabilities. Gibbon's early journals are more open and capacious; but they are still selective; and – as I have now confirmed – they have not yet been comprehensively published, any more than has his correspondence. A striking feature of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, for instance, is the degree to which its volumes appealed to women who were not formally educated in the classics. Yet many of the letters sent to Gibbon by female readers are omitted from scholarly editions of his works.

As far as Gibbon himself is concerned, concealment was sometimes a product of the fact that, like other famous historians – Tacitus in the ancient world (a major influence) or Reinhart Koselleck in the 20th century – he belonged to a defeated grouping. His family were Tories, a political grouping excluded from power after the Hanoverian Succession to the British throne in 1714. Moreover, many of these people supported the Catholic Stuart dynasty, which was ousted from Britain in 1688, while remaining a persistent threat (Edward Gibbon briefly became a Catholic convert in 1753). For the Gibbons as a family, these allegiances had two paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, choosing the wrong political side shut them out of many conventional perquisites and possibilities. On the other, it obliged them to explore different options, often outside of Britain. Some set up as traders with India, China, and (in part for slaves) the Caribbean. Others took positions and profits and spouses in Continental Europe, in France, Spain, and the German lands. Gibbon himself spent four years after his brief conversion in Lausanne, acquiring fluent French and meeting Voltaire and Rousseau etc.

I want to insert these transnational and transcontinental influences into my discussion both of Gibbon and his history writing. For instance, because he acquired fluent French

– and because of family contacts – he became quickly familiar with publications by French Jesuits on what we would now call China. This influenced his treatment of how nomadic peoples from the “Chinese” border and Central Asia impacted on the frontiers of the Roman Empire. My intention throughout indeed is to devise an essentially wide reassessment of Gibbon. More even than many other leading Enlightenment intellectuals, he pursued different, sometimes conflicting careers, working successively as a soldier, as a member of the British Parliament, and as a government bureaucrat and minor cog in the British imperial machine, as well as an avid historian with connections in different countries. Many commentators have sought to hive off these more official activities from Gibbon’s scholarship and history writing. It is more productive, I believe, to examine these various facets of Gibbon in tandem, investigating the tensions that sometimes ensued.

At present, I envisage a book of three parts. The first will present a revised account of Gibbon himself and is now substantially researched. The second will examine Gibbon’s vision and version of Ancient Rome in the context of his own intense experiences of empire. The third and final section will scrutinize and interrogate the growing reputation and different readings of the *Decline and Fall* across the world. When I came to think about this last portion of the work, I was enormously helped by feedback from various colleagues and officers at Wiko and by the careful research of the librarians. They devoted much time and patience to tracking the very many different editions and translations of *Decline and Fall* across time and geographical space. To them and to you all, my most grateful thanks.