



STANFORD

M A G A Z I N E

The Decline and Fall of Footnotes

by Bruce Anderson¹



THE SNAPPIER COVERS

Little loved by generations of students, readers and writers alike, footnotes are on the wane, say recent articles in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. The decline of the footnote has been linked to changes in the publishing business.

College libraries, corseted by budget squeezes, are no longer the principal buyers for the books produced by some academic presses. These books are now packaged to attract a broader audience, the Times says, with "catchier titles, snappier covers, more and better illustrations and fewer footnotes and bibliographies."



THE CLUTTERED LANDSCAPE

Some books have dropped the annotations altogether and others have simply moved them from the bottom of the page to the end of chapters or the back of the book where they are properly called endnotes.³ Norris Pope, the director of the Stanford University Press, says that the amount of notation has waned because much of the cutting-edge work in the humanities is speculative, and it relies more he says on

"intellection and reflection" than "on secondary sources and archival materials."

According to some, the use of footnotes has actually been in retreat for much of the 20th century: While the economic considerations may be recent, the aesthetic ones are quite old.⁴ At their worst, footnotes can be a repository for self-important erudition, a sign of too much research and too little analysis. They can obscure the principal text, clutter the landscape and, perhaps mercifully, put the reader to sleep. Consider the



soporific possibilities of the 165-page footnote that John Hodgson, a country vicar and antiquarian in 19th-century Britain, wrote in his *History of Northumberland*.

Hodgson's sesquipedalian note makes it easy to see why footnotes have been the frequent target of satire, parody and one-liners. In his farcical epic, *The Dunciad*, Alexander Pope burlesques both academics and critics, and one of his central devices is reams of pedantic footnotes. The 18th-century German satirist Gottlieb Wilhelm Rabener went a step further, writing a mock dissertation, "Hinkmars von Repkow Noten ohne Text," that is nothing but footnotes.⁵ This century, Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* consists of a 999-line poem and the endless footnotes produced by an academic colleague of the dead poet.⁶ As humorist Frank Sullivan observed: "Give a footnote an inch and it'll take a foot."⁷



As tedious as footnotes can be to read, they can be even more so to produce. For high school students and undergraduates, footnotes seem less a test of research skills or academic honesty than a trial of one's endurance and equanimity. In the heyday of the typewriter, footnotes could easily turn a five-hour assignment into a 10-hour labor. First, you had to figure out the math: How many lines do I type before I start inlaying the footnotes? Then you had to handle the Latin: Do I mean *op. cit.* or *loc. cit.*, *ibid.* or *id.*, *q.v.* or *cf.*? Finally, you had to roll the platen just so--no more, no less, exactement--to get the superscript numbers to sit correctly above the line.



Today's students miss out on these joys: Dozens of software programs can now do the calculations for you. It seems a cruel juxtaposition of history that at the very moment that footnotes become relatively painless to produce, they fall out of fashion. But one could argue that the whole point of footnotes--for undergraduates, at least--is the pain. Rendered painless, they have also been rendered pointless.

So shouldn't we all just wave farewell and sigh, "Good riddance"? Hardly. In the hands of a master, the potentially pedestrian footnote is elevated to a rhapsodic grace note. It can inform and entertain, clarify and illuminate. The artful practitioner "knows how to instruct and to amuse," writes Princeton history professor G.W. Bowersock in *The American Scholar*, "to unite *utile* with *dulci* in accordance with the unrivaled precept of Horace two thousand years ago."⁸

Footnotes allow us not only to see the prejudices of old sources, but the biases and convictions of the footnoter himself. They provide readers with the intellectual map that the writer has used to arrive at her conclusions. If some see footnotes as tiresome road blocks, others more fairly view them as serendipitous detours that can lead to delightful and unexpected stops not on the original itinerary. Footnotes gave birth--after an extended gestation, mind you--to the hypertext links that are the *vis vitae*, the life force, of the Internet.



Footnotes first appeared in the works of Western scholars sometime early in the 17th century.⁹ They were a technical device sired by the marriage of history and philology¹⁰ that allowed historians "to combine a high literary narrative with erudite investigations," writes Anthony Grafton, another Princeton scholar. Perhaps no one has mastered this melding of narrative and erudition, of utile and dulce, like Edward Gibbon, the venerated 18th-century English historian.



Gibbon wrote the sublime six-volume *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. "The footnotes [of Gibbon]," writes historian John Clive in his book *Not by Fact Alone*, "must not be forgotten. . . . They contain those flashes of wit and humor that help to ease the reader's long trek through the centuries, from the reference to the Abbé le Boeuf as 'an antiquar-ian, whose name was happily expressive of his talents,' to the comment on the learned Origen, who, eager for perpetual chastity, thought fit to castrate himself ('to disarm the tempter,' in Gibbon's phrase)."

In another footnote, Gibbon skewers St. Augustine, noting that his "learning is too often borrowed and . . . [his] arguments are too often his own." Elsewhere, he jabs at his friend Voltaire: "M. de Voltaire, unsupported by either fact or probability, has generously bestowed the Canary Islands on the Roman empire." The last note is classic Gibbon: accurate, acerbic and informative.

More than anything, Gibbon should make us rethink our attitude toward footnotes and the attendant deathwatch. emphasis in our schools has been to replicate the form rather than the content or style of a good footnote. We should remember that reading Gibbon without the footnotes is like listening to Mozart without the 16th notes; the music of each lacks its distinctive, ineffable magic when the little notes are taken away.



Ideally, footnotes are also a graceful acknowledgement that today's community of scholars is linked to and dependent on yesterday's community. As Sir Isaac Newton modestly noted in a letter to Robert Hooke, "If I have seen further [than you and Descartes] it is by standing upon the shoulders of Giants."¹¹ If Newton can be so generous, it should be easy for the modern scholar to acknowledge his or her intellectual debts.

The very word "scholar" has its root in the Latin "schola" or "school" and bespeaks a community or network of people striving together for understanding. "Footnotes are reminders that scholarship is an intrinsically communal enterprise--building on, revising or replacing the work of predecessors," noted Kenneth L. Woodward in *Newsweek*. Scholars are not "Lone Rangers, going it alone."

Illustrations by Bob Staake



1 Bruce Anderson, '79, wrote about campus parking in the November/ December issue of Stanford magazine.

3 Oddly, the most famous footnoter of all, Edward Gibbon, used endnotes in the first volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. At the encouragement of David Hume and others, Gibbon moved his annotations to the bottom of the page in his final five volumes.

4 William H. Honan, "Footnotes Offering Fewer Insights," *the New York Times*, 14 Aug. 1996, B9.

5 Anthony Grafton, "The Footnote from de Thou to Ranke," *History and Theory* (Wesleyan University, December 1994), p. 65.

6 Lawrence S. Lerner, "Nabokov's Revenge," *the New York Times*, 19 Aug. 1996, A14.

7 Honan, *op. cit.*, C1.

8 G.W. Bowersock, "The Art of the Footnote," *The American Scholar* (Winter 1983/84): 58.

9 Grafton, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

11 Not only did Newton's work build on that of others, his comment to Hooke did, too. This aphorism was apparently a commonplace in the 17th century. It has been used for almost 2,000 years, by writers ranging from Lucan to George Herbert, from Bernard of Chartres to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Robert K. Merton explored it fully in his short book, *On The Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (Free Press; 1965).

Source:

Stanford Magazine:

<<http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/1997/janfeb/articles/footnotes.html>>
(As accessed on December 19, 2004)

The *Decline and Fall* is known for the quality and irony of its prose, its use of primary sources, and its open criticism of organized religion. Bio from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Photo by Joshua Reynolds [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. This version includes working footnotes unobtrusively placed at the back of the book with active links for easy navigation, maps from the original book, modern maps, and links to audiobook of all volumes. Read more. Buy now with 1-Click . Sold by: Amazon.com Services LLC.

The *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Penguin Classics) Jun 19, 2000. by Edward Gibbon, David Womersley. (230). Another aspect *Decline and Fall* deals with is that of some characters often changing their identities. Philbrick, probably the best example in the novel, is first introduced as the butler at Llanabba School. The events that constitute the story time in *Decline and Fall* begin during Paul Pennyfeather's third year of uneventful residence at Scone (p. 11) with the Bollinger's Club annual dinner, after which he is dismissed from college. Events continue in the story with Paul working at Llanabba Castle as a school master, then living at King's Thursday with Margot Beste-Chetwynde, getting arrested when he is about to marry her, being in prison for a while, and then returning to Oxford under a new identity, until his third year of uneventful residence at Scone (p. 213).

Resources for Readers of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: Maps, Gazetteer, Footnote Translations, Illustrated Passages. Resources for Readers of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: Maps, Gazetteer, Footnote Translations, Illustrated Passages. DeclineAndFallResources.com. 27 October 2017 . Priscus, a Byzantine diplomat and historian, "exposed, in true and lively colours, the vices of a declining Empire the cruel absurdity of the Roman princes, unable to protect their subjects against the public enemy, unwilling to trust *Decline and Fall* by Evelyn Waugh is his first novel, published in 1928. It is a fictional work in the social satire genre set in England and Wales in the 1920s. It explores the societal conventions of the time surrounding education, values, marriage, the divisions in social classes, honor, racism, human behavior, and the helplessness of man before the uncontrollable and often inevitable aspects of life. The plot follows the life and times of the hapless Paul Pennyfeather, a student at Oxford University. Paul arrives at King's Thursday, Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde's home. In this surreal surrounding, Paul falls hopelessly in love with his hostess. She tempts him to stay by offering him a job helping her with her business interests in South America. *decline and fall. activities answers. Activity 4 after reading.* You might want to point out that for some British readers the title *Decline and Fall* would have an association with a famous history book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Edward Gibbon. *Activity 7 after reading. Encourage students to discuss all aspects of the book's humour.*