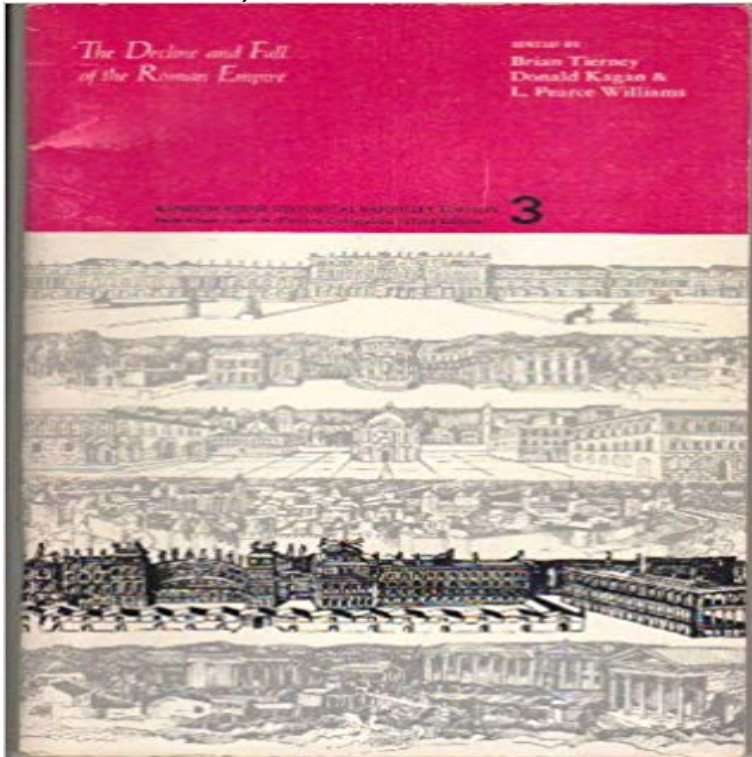


The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Great Issues in Western Civilization)



The problem of the causes of the decline and fall of the classical world as represented by the Roman Empire in the West is at least as old as the Renaissance and was posed in definitive form by Edward Gibbon in the eighteenth century. It has not yet lost its fascination, for in the twentieth century historians and philosophers of history have continued to use it as the focal point for speculations on the nature of historical change. The Roman Empire is admirably suited as a subject for such speculations, because it represents a complete cycle of civilization. At the same time, it is of special interest to students of Western civilization, for the classical heritage is a vital component of that civilization. The difficulties presented by the problem of the decline and fall are enormous. The passage of time and the vagaries of fortune have destroyed many of the sources we should like to have as evidence and have preselected the rest; but beyond the problem of sources is the difficult methodological problem of distinguishing cause from effect and assigning the proper weight to each contributing factor. In light of these difficulties it is not surprising that there seem to be as many interpretations as there are scholars and that each age has seen the problem from a different perspective. The selections presented here give some idea of the nature of the debate.

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