

middle- and upper-class Britons strove to uphold what Edmund Burke called "the decent drapery of life." In her title essay, Himmelfarb describes how five eminent couples (including the Carlyles and the Dickenses) undid the drapery only to restitch it as tightly and honestly as they could. The novelist George Eliot, for instance, insisted on being called "Mrs. Lewes" while living with her married lover. Even when thwarted by convention, Eliot typically tried to respect it—to temper it without destroying it.

Not so in later generations, as Himmelfarb shows in an essay about the Bloomsbury group, which flourished in London during the early years of the 20th century. Artists and thinkers in that gifted circle, Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell, and John Maynard Keynes, among others, rejected their elders' commitment to a service-oriented "religion of humanity." In the philosophy of their contemporary, G. E. Moore, the "Bloomsberries" found lofty justification for their aestheticism and other more self-centered pursuits.

Himmelfarb notes other, earlier stresses running through the oak of Victorian morality—Jeremy Bentham's stark utopianism (with its schemes for model prisons, poorhouses, and a highly centralized government); William Godwin's rosier vision of a perfect society; and the Fabian socialism of Sidney and Beatrice Webb. But even as it faded in the 20th century, the old moral code had a lingering effect on those who had challenged it: Beatrice Webb praised Soviet leaders (circa 1932) for being—of all things—morally upright, indeed, "model Puritans."

ANCIENT HISTORY:

Evidence and Models

by M. I. Finley

Viking, 1986

131 pp. \$17.95

Finley is the E. F. Hutton of classical studies: When he talks, his profession listens. Here the Cambridge historian speaks directly to his peers about the problems of their craft—the skimpiness of evidence, the unreliability of sources, the uncertainty about what the few surviving artifacts and statistics mean.

Thanks largely to the "new archaeology," artifacts now enjoy high status among classical historians. Remnants of Roman pottery, they maintain, speak more objectively than, say, Roman documents about such things as economic arrangements. Finley finds this faith naive, and in a

tightly woven essay argues that material evidence, like literary evidence, relies on "the conceptual framework from which the historian works."

Numbers, too, can be highly deceptive, despite efforts by demographic and economic historians to make them seem definitive. One such scholar's attempt to establish the relative price of slaves in fourth-century B.C. and second-century A.D. Rome was based partly on a sum mentioned in a Roman satirical poem. Flimsy stuff—yet, says Finley, nonspecialists awed by numbers accept such figures "on the *auctoritas* of the original author."

Finley points out some puzzling gaps in the study of ancient history. The bellicosity of Greeks and Romans is legend. (Between the Persian Wars in 499–478 B.C. and its defeat by Philip of Macedonia in 338 B.C., Athens was at war on the average more than two out of every three years.) Yet, apart from rehashing the views of contemporary chroniclers such as Thucydides, scholars have barely looked into the causes of ancient wars. Mysteriously, Finley observes, historians continue to ignore such matters as the "profits of war and their distribution."

If Finley's larger point is that the historian's answers can only be tentative, he also convincingly demonstrates the crucial importance of asking the right questions.

Contemporary Affairs

THE VANISHED IMAM: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon

by Fouad Ajami
Cornell, 1986
243 pp. \$17.95

In 1943, the year of Lebanon's independence, the Shia minority (about 20 percent of the nation's one million inhabitants) enjoyed the dubious reputation of being their nation's "hewers of wood and drawers of water." The lot of this dispirited minority, inhabitants mostly of the south, had not improved much by 1959, the year of the arrival of a young and charismatic Iranian cleric named Musa al Sadr.

Within a decade, his name was known throughout Lebanon and, indeed, the wider Islamic world. His "genius," according to author Ajami, a Middle East specialist at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, was his ability to forge a progressive, Shia-based social movement that appealed to people of vastly different back-