



that is itself somewhat revolutionary: namely, that the cultural origins of the Revolution lie beyond the witty *politesse* of the canonical Enlightenment, in the smutty, scandalous, and highly popular works of the so-called *Rousseaus du ruisseau* (Rousseaus of the gutter). In *The Business of Enlightenment* (1979), Darnton described how respectable publishers in France or just beyond its border sold illicit reading matter through such techniques as “marrying” or “larding” (splicing the pages of, say, *Fanny Hill* in French in between those of the New Testament). Now Darnton advances beyond the mechanics of book production and distribution to analyze the contents of these “hot” best sellers. The most popular illicit books of the pre-Revolutionary period (1750–89) were strange hybrids of materialist philosophy, explicit pornography, political slander, and radical utopianism. Darnton scrutinizes three books in particular: an ultra-racy novel, *Thérèse philosophe*; a political utopia

with the forward-looking title *The Year 2240*; and a libel (one of many) of Louis XV’s mistress, *Anecdotes of Madame the Countess du Barry*. Clearly, the line between smut and “serious” thinking was less sharply drawn at that time than today. In *Thérèse philosophe*, women and their lovers (usually priests) discuss fine points of materialist philosophy and utilitarian ethics between bouts of mutual masturbation, thus putting into practice John Locke’s proposition that all knowledge comes from the senses.

The question that Darnton gingerly circles is whether books, these or any others, actually make revolutions. His cautious, indirect answer goes something like this: books can offer readers stories that they understand in relation to their own “cultural frames,” which in turn may affect their behavior. The political slander aimed at Louis XV, his mistresses, and his hated ministers influenced readers’ perceptions of the political upheavals of the late 1770s, and in this indirect way possibly—but only possibly—contributed to the onset of revolution. Darnton’s “indirect causation” does not, in fact, much alter our basic understanding of the French Revolution. But by resurrecting works too explosive to have been included in the classical anthologies—yet works that 18th-century readers found nearly as *philosophiques* as Montesquieu’s political theory or Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*—Darnton has permanently altered our understanding of the Enlightenment that preceded the Revolution.

THE DE-MORALIZATION OF SOCIETY:

From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values.

By Gertrude Himmelfarb. Knopf. 314 pp. \$24

In the nine previous books that established her as a leading historian of the English Victorians, Himmelfarb insistently but discretely held up the Victorian past as a mirror to our modern ills. There is similar scholarship in *The De-Moralization of Society*, but the reticence is gone: now the past argues openly with the present (and wins). We have, Himmelfarb

pointedly suggests, a lot to learn from the Victorians, and we are only in second grade.

In elegant prose, the professor emeritus of history at the City University of New York shows how thoroughly we have misunderstood the Victorians—their family life and sexuality, their feminists and reformers, and much else. It was, she emphasizes, a society united, despite class fissures and other flaws, in its belief in “hard work, self-help, obedience, cleanliness, orderliness,” and in its pursuit of that all-important social glue, “respectability.” The Victorians, in other words, agreed on the virtues.

Thus even those who pushed against Victorian orthodoxy—and they were numerous—accepted and honored the larger values of Victorian society. The novelist George Eliot insisted on all the proprieties of married life—including the title “Mrs. Lewes”—even though Mr. Lewes, with whom she lived for 24 years, could not marry her. (He was unable to obtain a divorce from his wife.) “If there was one common denominator among” feminists of the period, Himmelfarb writes, “it was the belief that liberation—whether by means of the suffrage, or work, or education, or property and divorce reforms, or birth control—should not be purchased at the expense of ‘womanliness’ and the ‘domestic virtues.’”

The Victorians presided over a century of social progress, including not just a rising standard of living but even declining levels of crime and illegitimacy. Again, Himmelfarb argues, it was the Victorians’ extraordinary moral consensus that allowed this to happen. Under the New Poor Law of 1834, for example, they carefully distinguished between the independent but impecunious poor and the completely dependent pauper. The poor man could still claim a measure of respectability; the pauper was stigmatized, and was entitled to relief only at the workhouses (which were not quite as bad as those depicted in Dickens’s harrowing portrait, Himmelfarb says).

Himmelfarb says that it is our “reluctance to speak the language of morality, far more than any specific values, that separates us from the Victorians.” She traces this “de-

moralization” to what Friedrich Nietzsche in the late 1880s called the death of God. Nietzsche, she says, foresaw that this “would mean the death of morality and the death of truth—above all the truth of any morality.” Henceforth there would be no virtues, only “values”—one pretty much as good as any other.

In reality, the Victorians were already beginning to live off dwindling religious and moral capital when their queen took the throne in 1837. G. K. Chesterton observed that the Victorians were the first generation that “asked its children to worship the hearth without the altar.” Which leads to a question: to achieve the *re*-moralization of society urged by Himmelfarb, would it be enough to learn from the Victorians and, as she suggests, to apply their lessons to public policy, requiring welfare recipients, for example, to work? Or does the restoration of a moral society require a renaissance of religious conviction? That important question is never really engaged in this otherwise wise critique of our de-moralized society.

THE NIXON MEMO. By Marvin Kalb. Univ. of Chicago. 248 pp. \$19.95

THE HALDEMAN DIARIES. By H. R. Haldeman. Putnam. 698 pp. \$27.50

“There are no second acts in American lives,” F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed. Obviously he never met Richard Milhous Nixon. The only president ever forced to resign, Nixon (1913-94) by the time of his death was eulogized by the news media as “the most important figure of the postwar era.” How Nixon managed his apparent metamorphosis from dishonored ex-pol to elder statesman is chronicled with righteous gusto by Kalb, a former diplomatic correspondent who was once placed on Nixon’s “enemies lists.”

Fittingly for a politician who rose to prominence as a redbaiter, Nixon’s post-Watergate road to rehabilitation led through Moscow. Using the same genius for self-promotion and disregard for ideological consistency that had allowed him to begin normal-