
NEW TITLES

History

**THE VICTORIANS AND
ANCIENT GREECE**
by Richard Jenkyns
Harvard, 1980
386 pp. \$30

In 19th-century Victorian England, the well-to-do were learning to preside over an empire. They embraced the model of ancient Greece. Conversational knowledge of Homer, Aristotle, and Praxiteles became the measure of gentility. Novelists George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Oscar Wilde, architects, painters, and sculptors alluded to or imitated the classical style. "There was always some tendency for people to use the Greeks as a means of confirming their own prejudgements," writes Jenkyns, a lecturer in classics at the University of Bristol. And the Victorians made up a fairy-tale antiquity that collapsed under scrutiny. They saw life in ancient Greece as calm and harmonious. The British Empire, they assumed, was the natural heir to that superior legacy. So, for example, the class hierarchy implicit in the writings of Homer reinforced the Victorian belief in aristocracy; and Platonic love became, for some leisured dandies, a philosophical rationalization for conspicuous homosexuality. The Victorians' glorified vision of history and of their role in it left England's leaders ill-prepared for 20th-century events—overseas challenges to *Pax Britannica* and the social disruption brought on by World War I.

**THE THREE EDWARDS:
War and State in England,
1271–1377**
by Michael Prestwich
St. Martin's, 1980
336 pp. \$25

The reigns of England's first three Edwards during the Middle Ages were marked by continuous warfare against Wales, Scotland, and France. Then as later, financing combat was a major problem—especially after 1294 when hostilities with France broke out, a prelude to the Hundred Years' War. The traditional, feudal means of raising an army had been to summon nobles for military service without recompense; these men were expected to