

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: FINLEY'S IMPACT – A
BALANCE SHEET

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Moses Finley, who was born in May 1912, stands out among twentieth-century historians of the Greek and Roman worlds for his unusual career path, his effect on the academic profession and his impact on the wider non-academic world.¹ A precocious college student, trained initially in law, but who then turned to the social sciences, Finley approached Ancient History from an interest in land reform (a story told in more detail here by Daniel Tompkins). Although he was already complaining of the inadequacy of existing ancient historical work at the age of twenty, Finley was thirty-six before he achieved his first appointment as an ancient historian, at Rutgers University. He was dismissed from Rutgers because he refused to answer questions about his links to the Communist Party, came to Britain and was offered positions at both Oxford and Cambridge, accepting a lectureship in the Faculty of Classics at Cambridge in 1955.

Finley brought to Ancient History both a set of unusual interests – above all in social and economic history – and a sheaf of social science methods. To a world intent on scrutinizing the precise wording of individual sentences by Greek and Roman writers, he brought an insistence on questions and models. The study of Greek slavery and of the ancient economy, in particular, turned in very particular directions under his influence.

Finley also brought to the ivory tower of Classics an insistence on engagement with the wider world. After his initial monograph, the publication of his doctoral thesis as *Studies in*

¹ Finley was born 'Moses Finkelstein'. For the change of name see below, p. 13.

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Land and Credit, discussed here by Paul Millett, all his books were addressed to a wider readership than merely specialists in Greek history.² What is more, much of his writing was not in the form of books at all, but of reviews, articles for the broadsheet press and radio talks, many of which were subsequently published in *The Listener* or collected and published as paperback books. The proper ambitions of a whole generation of classical scholars were directed to making the specialist knowledge, and the excitement of academic discussion and discovery, accessible to non-specialists.

Given his interest in wider communication and his insistence on proper historical method, Finley had a low opinion of the way in which Ancient History was taught in schools. Characteristically, he set about doing something about it. The curriculum for Ancient History in schools in the United Kingdom was rewritten under his inspiration, with an emphasis not just on questions and on a range of historical issues, but also on getting school students to work directly with (translated) primary sources.

The sum result of this very particular career and very particular set of emphases was a scholar who became extremely widely known. He was widely known among scholars in the humanities, in Europe as well as in Britain, and behind the Iron Curtain as well as in the west, for his strong insistence on method, which ensured his influence also well beyond the field of merely Ancient History, as the chapter by Wilfried Nippel shows. He was widely known among schoolteachers, as the chapter by Dorothy Thompson shows, because of his involvement in the school curriculum and in the Joint Association of Classical Teachers. He was widely known among a more general public, who had heard his unmistakable voice on radio or read reviews and articles by him in newspapers and weeklies,

² Defradas opens his review of Finley's *World of Odysseus* (*REA* 58 (1956) 371) 'Ce livre ... est destiné au grand public qui ne lit pas le grec et n'a pas une connaissance particulière de l'histoire grecque (p. 165). On y rencontre donc des développements assez sommaires, mais toujours sérieusement fondés, sur les origines de l'histoire grecque, sur la question homérique, mais bien souvent aussi des aperçus suggestifs qui rendent sa lecture utile au spécialiste.'

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as the chapter by Mary Beard shows. His distinction led not merely to his appointments, discussed by Geoffrey Lloyd in his chapter, as first Reader in and then Professor of Ancient History in Cambridge and election as a Fellow of the British Academy, but also to appointment as Master of Darwin College, Cambridge and a knighthood.

There are many reasons why this remarkable man and his career merit revisiting on the centenary of his birth. The period between Finley's precocious college success and his departure from the USA have remained, until Daniel Tompkins's recent researches, poorly known, and yet they so shaped Finley's intellectual attitudes as to demand further inquiry. Appropriately, two celebrations in the USA have led to collections of studies that focus on that period.³ In a period when classical scholarship in the UK was in general rather insular, Finley was notable for the range and warmth of his relations with scholars in Europe and for his encouragement to others to play on a European stage. A conference in Paris recently explored the nature of Finley's influence in France.⁴ Finley's extraordinary, and lasting, stature in the UK, not simply within Ancient History but across and indeed beyond the academy, which was achieved quite rapidly after his arrival in Cambridge, puts him in a class of his own. It is this stature that we seek to analyse in this book.

The centenary of Finley's birth has fallen at a time when the question of the wider impact that scholarly activities should properly have has been brought to the top of the agenda in the United Kingdom. Academics in the United Kingdom have for the past five years or so been facing demands from government, through research councils and the periodic research reviews conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), that expenditure of public money to support academic research should be justified by consequent

³ Harris 2013, Naiden and Talbert 2014.

⁴ The papers from this conference are published in the 2014 edition of the journal *Anabasis*, in a section entitled 'Moses I. Finley (1912–86) et sa réception en France.' The existence of this separate treatment of Finley's impact in France has caused us to focus our consideration of Finley's European connections elsewhere (see Nippel's chapter).

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social and economic benefits. Discussion of what impact, beyond impact on research in the field in question, might appropriately be expected from research in the arts, social sciences and humanities, has led to government agreeing that impacts on civil society, cultural life, economic prosperity, education outside one's own institution, policy making, public discourse and public services are all legitimate forms of impact.⁵ *Prima facie*, Finley's research can be reckoned to have impacted at least on cultural life, education and economic prosperity (the considerable royalties achieved from his publications have served to fund the Moses and Mary Finley Research Fellowship at Darwin College).⁶ It therefore seemed to us as Finley's successors, teaching and researching Greek and Roman history at the University of Cambridge, to be both interesting and apt to celebrate his centenary by devoting a conference, and this volume, to trying to understand just what impact Finley had and has continued to have.

Few ancient historians teaching in universities today would not regard Finley's works as variously important in their own intellectual formation. Many will reckon to trace back some of their fundamental views on ancient historical method to Finley's work. But did that influence stem from particular publications by Finley? How much impact did individual works by Finley have when they appeared? What lasting changes in Ancient History are to be attributed to his influence? How well have his various methodological and substantive claims stood up to the test of time? And to where should we trace the origins of his significant impact on wider public dialogues?

In order to answer these questions we assembled a team of scholars of the ancient world with a very wide range of

⁵ We cite here the terms employed in assessing the impact of research in the arts and humanities in HEFCE's Research Excellence Framework 2014 (the criteria used by the four panels can be accessed at www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/2012-01/). Whether there is any way of measuring such impact at all precisely or comparing actual impact with some notion of the impact that *should* be achieved remain intractable issues.

⁶ For this sort of impact of Finley's work cf. Walter Scheidel's chapter. Scheidel is himself one ancient historian who has held the Finley Fellowship, the others being Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, Valérie Huet, Barbara Kowalzig, Karin Tybjerg, Aleka Lianeri, Jennifer Gates-Foster, Michael Scott, Daniel Jew and Benjamin Raynor.

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expertise and with very varying degrees of acquaintance with Finley himself – from those who had been colleagues and/or pupils of Finley, through those who knew him only as a lecturer, to those who never knew him at all and have become acquainted with the man only through his works. Each of these scholars was asked to look closely at just one aspect of Finley's work – either a particular book or collection of work on a particular topic, or work in a particular genre, or Finley's relationship with a broader academic world. Our intent was to try to understand in detail how the massive impression that Finley made was achieved. Was it that his colossal impact in one area led to his impact in other areas, or was it the very range of his scholarly involvement that created the overall impression? By including both those who knew Finley well and were personally indebted to him in various ways, and those who never knew him and owe their debts only to the wisdom they have derived from his publications, we hoped to weigh up the man against his words. If, we thought, the current debate about whether it would make sense, even were it possible, to link scholars' impact to particular published research outputs was ever to be settled, the examination of how exactly the ancient historian who during the twentieth century made the greatest impression on the English-speaking world achieved his impact was the way to do it.

The story that emerged from the collective endeavours displayed in Cambridge more than three days in May 2012, both in formal papers and in warm reminiscence and lively discussion and debate, proved, in our view, sufficiently unexpected, and sufficiently interesting, to merit this wider publication. The papers not only provide an extraordinary review of Finley's life's work in Ancient History, bringing out what exactly he contributed to the debates in which he participated in his lifetime, and his on-going place in debates still current, but also indicate how difficult it is to match the impression that he left with the writings that we read today. Going back to Finley's books and articles revealed that it was much harder to find the clear statements of method that many speakers had remembered themselves gaining from those works. What Finley wrote,

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and what pupils gathered from Finley's own teaching, proved to be further apart than we had expected. Finley's methods and treatment of evidence, when examined closely on the page, proved much less consistent, and his arguments less clearly articulated, than memory, and Finley's own resonant tones, had suggested. Only a small part of Finley's published output turns out to have provoked close scholarly engagement; much that he published has been regularly cited but much less often made the focus of further debate. The most powerful impression Finley produced proved to be the impression made by the spoken word, whether heard in the lecture room, on the radio or in personal conversation (the importance of which between scholars emerges particularly from Peter Garnsey's discussion of the friendship of Finley and Arnaldo Momigliano). The contributors to the conference have been variously encouraged to reflect upon the discussion and to revise their papers in the light of everything else that they heard in those three days. We offer the results here.

Finley was a man of deep learning and strong political convictions; among Greek and Roman historians, he was uniquely well read in the social sciences. The knowledge that his most discussed publication was a book entitled *The Ancient Economy*, considered here by Alessandro Launaro, that he was heavily involved more than twenty-five years with the study of slavery, considered here by Kostas Vlassopoulos, that his classic articles include one on the Athenian demagogues and his named lectures series one entitled *Democracy Ancient and Modern* and another *Politics in the Ancient World*, considered here by Paul Cartledge, might lead one to expect that his impact was consequent on bringing a particular social science approach and a particular set of political convictions to Greek and Roman History. This proves not entirely untrue. There is little doubt that Finley's set of questions, on the one hand, and his criteria for what would count as an answer, on the other, were indeed heavily influenced by his political and social science experience. Although the early work tends to refer only occasionally to texts outside the immediate scholarly literature, Weber's presence, in particular, becomes very clear in the books and

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papers written in the 1970s and 1980s, for all that turns out to be a very eclectic reading of Weber.⁷

Nevertheless, as the papers by Dorothy Thompson and Kostas Vlassopoulos reveal, references to modern literature on slavery were more prominent in his teaching than in his publications. Most of Finley's publications trail so little modern social science before the reader that scholars have sometimes doubted (wrongly) his familiarity with elements of that literature.⁸ His *Ancient Economy* helped to lose him a good scholarly friend, Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, because in the book Finley's rejection of class analysis appeared to betray his proper left-wing roots. Certainly Finley seems never to have sought reflexively to influence social or political science through the ancient case study. Outside the explicit engagement in *Democracy Ancient and Modern* – occasioned, as Paul Cartledge explains in his paper, by this being derived from the lectures that Finley gave when invited back to Rutgers University twenty years after he was obliged to leave – readers would be hard-pressed to find in Finley's work on Greek or Roman politics anything but the vaguest of political programmes.

But, it might be thought, even if Finley's impact on the academic world did not depend on the reproduction of his own intellectual formation, nevertheless it has surely been the case that the areas of Ancient History that he touched were transformed? In fact, as these papers show, Finley's contemporaries were well aware of, and variously drew immediate attention to, significant flaws and deficiencies in his arguments, the limitations in his use of evidence and the implausibility of some of the claims he made. The papers whose substantial propositions have endured have tended to be his least radical – the papers 'The Athenian Demagogues', for instance, and 'The Athenian Empire – a Balance Sheet'. Perhaps only in the case of *The Ancient Economy* did a significant part – though certainly not all – of the scholarly world try, for a generation, to substantiate

⁷ As Nafissi 2005 has shown.

⁸ So Lane Fox famously questioned how well acquainted Finley was with Marcel Mauss's *Le Don* when he wrote *The World of Odysseus*, occasioning a demonstration from Hornblower 2004 that he did indeed know that text well.

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the claims that Finley made, before generally concluding that the task was vain and that neither ancient evidence nor coherent argument supported his view. It is not simply that Finley's radical work has been superseded because subsequent scholars have built upon the foundations that he laid. His most radical claims have, in most cases, been overturned.

It remains indisputable, however, that the impact that Finley made during and since his lifetime has been enormous – and unsettled archaeologists as well as historians, as Jennifer Gates-Foster shows here. But it stemmed from force of personality, from an attractively trenchant approach to basic questions of methodology and from a no-nonsense presentation that came across well on the page but which made its full impression on the ear. That impression was first and foremost on his undergraduate pupils, and is well captured here by Dorothy Thompson. While many others turned up to lecture rooms with scripts that they read, Finley turned up knowing what he wanted to say and saying it on the basis of notes so discreetly deployed that many thought he used no notes at all. But the impression of Finley's personality was conveyed also through his radio talks, discussed here by Mary Beard. As with a number of other scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, it was the recognizability of his voice and style on the radio that made Finley widely known. The radio talk demanded a voice of authority, and Finley's voice certainly had that. But the radio broadcast also lent its authority to Finley. It enabled, and was then reinforced by, publication both in newspapers and weeklies and with what was one of the very few mass-circulation publishers of serious books in the UK in the 1960s – Penguin books. It also ensured that when Finley involved himself with the school curriculum he could command space in *The Times* to discuss it.

Tracing Finley's influence on those who heard him only on radio has proved beyond our capacity. But his influence on those who were lectured to and supervised by him as undergraduates and graduates is more easily traced.⁹ The late Keith Hopkins

⁹ See further the appendices to Dorothy Thompson's chapter, pp. 145–9 below.

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was in no doubt at all that it was the seminars that Finley held jointly with A. H. M. Jones that were the only exciting thing happening in Ancient History during his time as an undergraduate, and it was those seminars that attracted and proved of lasting significance also to students in the Faculty of History, such as John Dunn and Quentin Skinner. The excitement came from the conversational tone and the sense of a mind actively at work. The same was true of Finley's undergraduate supervisions. Among his undergraduate pupils at Jesus College were Richard Gordon, John Drinkwater and Richard Tuck, upon whom his influence came not so much from particular positions argued for in the face of their essays but from the expectation that they were engaged in an intellectually serious exercise and one that linked in to, and needed to draw inspiration from, what was happening in other disciplines. Finley's PhD students included (in more or less chronological order) Dorothy Thompson, Alastair Jackson, Richard Gordon, Richard Winton, Michel Austin, Richard Talbert, David Whitehead, Philip Lomas, Paul Millett, Stephen Hodkinson, Ricardo Martinez Lacy, David Cohen and Gabriel Herman, but many more were inspired by what Richard Saller described as 'an environment made stimulating by Professor Sir Moses Finley'.¹⁰

This work is not a biography as such, but it is organized in a broadly chronological way, with the books discussed in the order in which they were written. Such a chronological treatment is facilitated by the emerging fact that Finley's career moved by decades. His arrival as a significant historian of Ancient Greece belongs to the 1950s, with the publication of his doctoral work as *Studies in Land and Credit*, of *The World of Odysseus* and of significant articles on slavery, and with the establishment of a teaching style that got him the following of some exceptional pupils, both undergraduate and graduate. The decade of the 1960s saw Finley publish no seriously significant research-based book in Ancient History (for the problematic position of *Ancient Sicily* in Finley's corpus, see the chapter by Jonathan Prag). The 1960s was, however, the

¹⁰ Saller 1982: vii.

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decade in which Finley became the predominant ancient historian in the UK, because of his enormous outpouring of radio broadcasts, writing for the weeklies, book reviews, publication of collections of essays variously popularizing the subject, editing of a book series seeking to push back the boundaries of Ancient History (not least by engaging scholars who were not themselves historians) and steering through the redesign of how Ancient History was taught and examined in schools. In the late 1960s, he twice mobilized the great and the good in Cambridge to take action over political issues – protesting at the reactions to student violence at his own alma mater, Columbia, and seeking to secure practical support for Greek academics fleeing the Colonels. By 1970 Finley's stature was secure, and the 70s were the decade in which that was repeatedly underlined by honours of various sorts – election to the Chair of Ancient History at Cambridge in 1970, election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1971, invitations back to Rutgers University and to Berkeley to give the Sather Lectures, Presidency of the Classical Association and so on. This was the decade of books made up not of the texts of short talks but the texts of prestigious lectures. It was also the decade in which Finley came to refer much more explicitly to work in social science, above all, but not solely, in relation to the economy, for this is the decade of his Jane Harrison lecture 'Anthropology and the Classics' (1972), of *The Use and Abuse of History* (1975) and of his paper 'The Ancient City: From Fustel de Coulanges to Max Weber and Beyond'. By 1980 Finley had retired and was no longer active even as a graduate supervisor; his last works were essentially restatements of his position with questions of method and theory increasingly dominating over questions of substance.

As this outline makes clear, with the exception of *The World of Odysseus*, discussed in Chapter 4, the book publications most readily recalled when Finley is mentioned (such as *The Ancient Economy*) date from after the moment that Finley makes his impact in the 1960s, in the United Kingdom and abroad, not before. His impact did not depend on his work in areas where he had made in-depth research, but upon