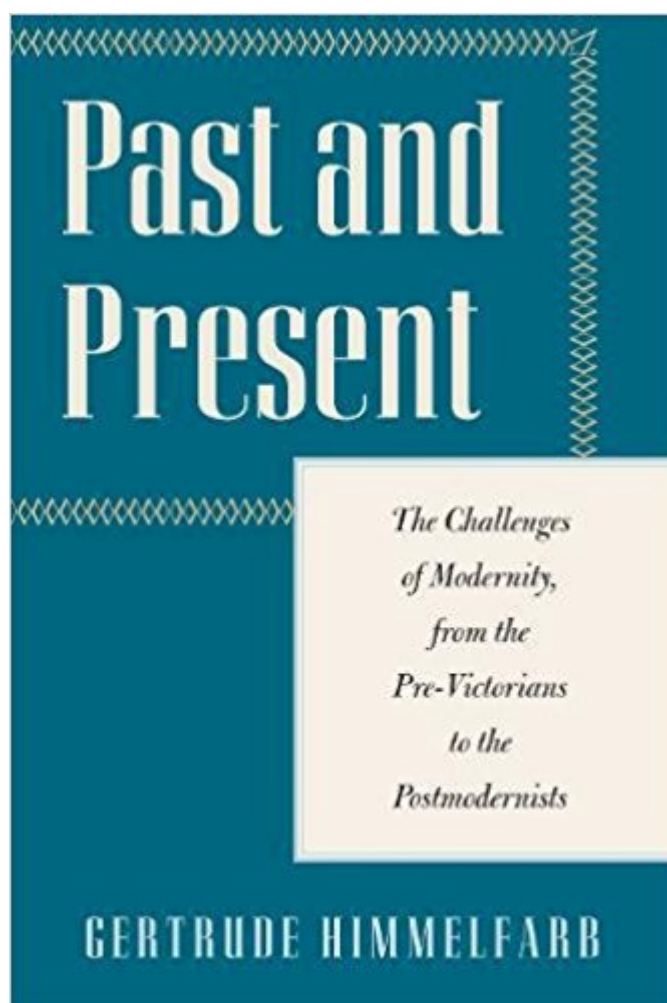


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# Past And Present: The Challenges Of Modernity, From The Pre-Victorians To The Postmodernists (Encounter Classics)



## Synopsis

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” wrote William Faulkner. In *Past and Present*, an eminent American historian and cultural critic shows the truth of that statement. The common theme of the twenty essays gathered here is the intriguing, often unexpected ways in which the past continues to illuminate the present. Gertrude Himmelfarb helps us find a new perspective on contemporary issues through a trenchant analysis of debates and thinkers from earlier times. She allows the past to inform the present, without distorting either past or present. The topics of the essays vary widely, from the disorders of modern democracy to the challenges of postmodernism, from the Victorian ethos to the Jewish question. The thinkers examined range from Edmund Burke to Leo Strauss, from Cardinal Newman to Lionel Trilling. The political figures who appear here are also diverse, from Benjamin Disraeli to Winston Churchill, from the American founders to Queen Elizabeth II. Running through all the essays as a first premise is the conviction that the pursuit of knowledge and truth, however difficult or discomfiting, matters immensely in the practical life, to use Trilling’s terms, as it does in the moral life. *Past and Present* is a notable contribution to this endeavor to understanding where we have been, where we are today, and where we may be (or should be) going.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gertrude Himmelfarb describes herself as an “old-timer” in this profound and thought-provoking book, but in fact the themes she addresses are timeless, as one would expect

from the greatest conservative thinker writing today. She sees today's issues totally clearly, dispensing with the cant, and places them all in their correct historical context. From Churchill to Lionel Trilling, Thucydides to Einstein, Thomas Carlyle to Caitlyn Jenner, she always has something new, important and interesting to say.

• Professor Andrew Roberts, Lehrman Institute Distinguished Fellow at the New York Historical Society

• Gertrude Himmelfarb's terrific new volume of essays spans an intellectual life sustained over some seventy years. Her crisp prose, luminous intelligence and common sense are manifest throughout. This is a one-woman arsenal of civilization, mobilizing the best of past culture to come to the aid of a present beset by anarchy.

• Daniel Johnson, founding editor of Standpoint

• Gertrude Himmelfarb's latest collection of essays is a lively and up-to-date discussion of a range of important subjects, which I heartily recommend to all readers who love history and political ideas.

• Paul Johnson, writer and historian

• Gertrude Himmelfarb writes about issues that are at the center of the present crisis: nationalism, constitutional perils, the deterioration of civil society, culture wars with wisdom that could come only with her profound grasp of the intellectual history of the West. As I read it, I kept thinking, "This is a one-volume liberal education." Professor Himmelfarb would be the first to point out that's not possible. But *Past and Present* comes awfully close.

• Charles Murray

• The best from the best! These elegant essays, from our finest intellectual historian, illuminate contemporary versions of enduring cultural and political questions by revisiting their earlier manifestations and the best that was thought and said about them. Each essay is a luminous gem, carved out of Ms. Himmelfarb's impeccable scholarship, and polished by her singularly wise intelligence and keen moral sense.

• Leon R. Kass, Professor Emeritus, Committee on Social Thought, The University of Chicago

Gertrude Himmelfarb, professor emeritus at the Graduate School of the City of New York, is a distinguished intellectual and cultural historian. Her most recent books are *The People of the Book: Philosemitism in England*, *The Jewish Odyssey of George Eliot*, *The Moral Imagination: From Adam Smith to Lionel Trilling*, and *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments*.

Ms Himmelfarb, even at her advanced age, hits it out of the ballpark with her most recent book. This is a welcome addition to her impressive collection of work over multitude of decades. Ms Himmelfarb is to be admired & read extensively !

This is a very interesting set of essays from one of the grand women of American conservatism. I am glad I purchased the book.

very stimulating and thoughtful read.

Stunningly good.

Perfect combination of substance and style

This is not the usual type of book people read these days. Himmelfarb is 94 years old and has a broader perspective on things than most people. This book covers issues from ancient Greek philosophy to the present. It is a series of essays she wrote over the last six decades. As a result, a common theme is not readily apparent at first. But she provides one by stating that people generally judge the past by the standards of the present. She sets out to judge the present by the standards of the past. After covering various topics, her main theme becomes apparent. She is particularly concerned by the "moral decay" of today. These include illegitimacy, crime, violence, drug addiction, illiteracy, welfare dependency, and all the other social pathologies we have gotten used to. These essays were written around the time of the Clinton administration when rational discussion of these issues was still possible. Any criticism of these developments now would generally engender the label of racism, fascism, or worse. But since this book was published the middle class has struck back with the election of Trump and the welfare state is on the defensive. Himmelfarb counters these pathologies with her "Victorian Values," which were championed by Margaret Thatcher, and are also known as the Protestant Work Ethic. These include that work ethic, thrift, prudence, temperance, punctuality, sobriety, and the value most detested by the left today: self-reliance. This dichotomy is highlighted today with the relentless attack the established welfare state has mounted on the election of Trump. Various elites such as the media, academia, Hollywood, Silicon Valley, parts of Wall Street, government bureaucrats, and unelected judges have declared war on the election of Trump and trying to overturn the results of that election. It would be interesting to hear her analysis of this phenomenon. As essentially a Victorian psychologically, she may not approve of his style. Yet his style has been the most successful in mounting the strongest attack on the moral decay she abhors. She also mentions the mother of the British welfare state, Beatrice Webb, who helped create the welfare state but was concerned that an overly generous welfare state would produce a parasite class and be a demoralizing influence on the work ethic. FDR, the father of the American welfare

state, voiced similar concerns. The current hysteria over any diminution of the welfare state shows them to be correct.

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