

Introduction to Himmelfarb Panel

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I am honored to have been asked to chair today's session--a tribute to the memory and the accomplishments of Gertrude Himmelfarb, the illustrious historian and author who died last year at the age of 97.

I first met Gertrude Himmelfarb in 1971 when I began working as Assistant Editor of *The Public Interest*, a quarterly journal edited by her husband Irving Kristol. So I knew her by her family name, Bea Kristol, before I had a clear sense of the eminence of Gertrude Himmelfarb as a scholar. At that time she was teaching in the City University of New York, where she had earned her undergraduate degree before completing her doctoral studies at the University of Chicago. In 1978 she was named distinguished professor of history at the Graduate School of the City University, where she continued to teach until after she and Irving moved to Washington in the mid-1980s.

In looking back at her life and work, one cannot fail to be astonished at her extraordinary productivity. By my count, she wrote at least 16 books, ranging from lengthy historical works based on extensive and meticulous research to collections of essays addressing contemporary as well as historical subjects. Though for many years she had no university affiliation, she became the preeminent scholar of Victorian England of her generation. Her early works were on the lives and thought of the leading thinkers of that era—book-length studies of Lord Acton, of Charles Darwin and Darwinism, and of John Stuart Mill, along with a collection of essays published under the title *Victorian Minds*. This book, subtitled *A Study of Intellectuals in Crisis and Ideologies in Transition*, begins with essays on Edmund Burke, Jeremy Bentham, and Thomas Malthus, late eighteenth-century thinkers whom Himmelfarb classified as “proto-Victorians.”

Himmelfarb's next book, *The Idea of Poverty*, became the first in a two-volume study of more than 1,000 pages that traced British thought and policy toward poverty from the time of Adam Smith and Malthus down through the 1880s. Remarkably, this monumental work of scholarship (the second volume would be entitled *Poverty and Compassion*) is also eminently readable, thanks to the grace and lucidity of Himmelfarb's prose. She notes at the outset of the first volume that long-dominant Christian conceptions had regarded poverty either as “a blessing to be devoutly sought” by those who “embraced it as a sacred vow” or as “an unhappy fact of life, a cross to be borne with Christian fortitude or resisted with

unchristian defiance.” She then examines how growing secularism transformed this earlier outlook, and how the industrial revolution led poverty to be viewed instead as a “social problem” to be solved.

Tracing in detail the ways in which views of poverty evolved over a hundred-year period, she draws upon a staggering variety of sources, including philosophers, economists, religious and political leaders, charitable organizations, radical newspapers, and works of fiction. In the latter category she considers not merely famous authors like Disraeli and Dickens, but also largely forgotten writers whose novels were extremely popular in their day. I find *The Idea of Poverty* to be perhaps the most illuminating and impressive of all Himmelfarb’s writings.

But she went on to write many more notable books, increasingly addressing issues of contemporary culture and society, though usually in the light shed by comparisons with the morals and manners of earlier times. Among these books were numerous collections of essays—*Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians*; *The New History and the Old*; *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*; *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*; *One Nation, Two Cultures*, and *The Moral Imagination: From Edmund Burke to Lionel Trilling*. The evocative titles of these collections convey a good sense of the ground that they cover and of her preoccupation with issues of morality and of culture.

She also found time to complete another major work of intellectual history: *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments*, a book that I believe is a favorite of Professor Espada and that he might well have assigned to students at the Instituto. Finally, in the last decade of her life Professor Himmelfarb published two books on British attitudes toward Jews and a final collection of essays entitled *Past and Present: the Challenges of Modernity from the pre-Victorians to the Postmodernists*.

Despite her unconventional academic career and her frequent critiques of contemporary attitudes and approaches, she received a number of high honors and distinguished awards. She was a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Historical Society, as well as of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Society of American Historians. She was a member of the Council of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Council of Scholars of the Library of Congress, and the Board of Trustees of the Woodrow Wilson Center. In 1991 she was invited by the National Endowment for the Humanities to deliver its annual

Jefferson Lecture, and in 2004 she was presented with the Humanities Medal by the President of the United States.

She garnered all these achievements despite having begun her career in an era when it was still difficult for women to rise to the top of the academic profession. Moreover, she somehow was able to write all those books while enjoying a long and happy marriage and raising two wonderful children—her daughter Liz Nelson and her son Bill Kristol, whom we will hear from shortly.

I want to conclude these remarks by emphasizing what a lovely person Bea was. I never encountered anyone who didn't like Bea or had a harsh word to say about her. It is true that I didn't hang out with postmodern historians, who I am sure had no use for her. But I did know people who had parted ways from Bea and Irving in the internecine warfare among the New York intellectuals, and yet retained a personal fondness for them. Like Irving, Bea could be a fierce polemicist in her writings, but she was unfailingly courteous in her personal relations. She had a spine of steel, but she was nonetheless a gentle soul, and the world is poorer in her absence.

I will now give the floor to our panelists, who both are old friends of mine. Our principal speaker is Bill Kristol, the founder and longtime Editor of the *Weekly Standard*, which until its recent demise was America's leading conservative publication. Bill had the great good fortune of being born into the Kristol family, but he has carved out an impressive career of his own and is probably better known to the American public than was either of his parents. But first we will hear a briefer presentation by Professor Joao Carlos Espada, our virtual host and the mastermind of the Estoril Political Forum, who obviously is known to you all.