

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Eminent essayists

by [Alexandra Mullen](#)

On *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays*, edited by Gertrude Himmelfarb.

*Gertrude Himmelfarb, editor*

The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays.  
Yale University Press, 336 pages, \$35

The historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has been writing important books on Victorian life and mores for over fifty years. In 1952 she published *Lord Acton: A Study of Conscience and Politics*. Her latest offering is an anthology of nonfictional readings from the period, ranging from Carlyle's "Signs of the Times," published in 1829, two years after Victoria came to the throne, to T. H. Huxley's "Evolution and Ethics" from 1893, eight years before she died. The collection illustrates Himmelfarb's view that the spirit of the Victorian age defined itself as much in its books and ideas as in political battles and societal strife.

That said, this is a historian's anthology, not a literary critic's one. Walter Bagehot and Lord Acton take a bow; Walter Pater does not. Ruskin checks in with "The Roots of Honour," an essay on—or, more accurately, against—political economy that first appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* under Thackeray's editorship rather than with the earlier bravura style of "The Nature of Gothic" or the later Lear-like ragings of "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century." Novelists, when they get a look-in, do so from less familiar vantage points: Thackeray from his anatomy of snobs, which first appeared in *Punch*; Eliot in the *Westminster Review* critically examining an early example of an evangelical demagogue; Dickens, writing for the *Examiner* before he began his own journals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, demolishing the confused arguments for mandatory teetotalism while decrying the problems caused by drunkenness among the poor.

Even political figures come bearing unfamiliar affidavits. Macaulay is represented not by one of his historical essays or by his often anthologized evisceration of Southey's *Colloquies*, but by his maiden speech in Parliament as he developed it in the *Edinburgh Review*. The topic: Civil Disabilities of the Jews. Gladstone, in the gap between his third and fourth stints as prime minister, appears here picking apart Mrs. Humphry Ward's theological bestseller *Robert Elsmere* (1888).

Although the topics of the essays I've mentioned may seem like curious backwaters to us now, at the time they fed the mainstream of Victorian thought and sensibility. It is currently fashionable, for example, to talk about "recuperating" aspects of bygone ages and ideas; this often seems to mean, for the Victorians, resexifying them for prurient tastes. (Is "prurient" an exaggeration? I'd say not: A recent book devotes several pages to speculations about whether Prince Albert had a pierced penis in which to wear a ring—perhaps to maintain an elegant and inoffensive silhouette in form-fitting trousers or to make the Queen's life more enjoyable. The book finally admits that the whole thing

was made up by the Californian founder of *Piercing World* in the 1970s.)

Himmelfarb has two advantages over narrower sensibilities in identifying the Spirit of the Age. First, she does not indulge in anachronism but treats the Victorians in terms they would recognize and affirm. A recurring subject in her books is the Moral Imagination (a favorite phrase she takes from Burke). In reprinting Gladstone on Mrs. Humphry Ward, for example, she tacitly reminds us that ordinary educated Victorians didn't blench at a forty-page essay on the nuances as well as the fundamentals of religious argument. Similarly, while she reprints here only one essay on women's suffrage—Millicent Garrett Fawcett's pro-suffrage "The Future of Englishwomen: A Reply"—she is nonetheless careful to remind us of the existence of intelligent arguments by other women against women's suffrage; I would cite, as a startling example, the "Appeal Against Female Suffrage" that appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* in 1889 signed by, among a hundred or so others, the wives of Matthew Arnold, H. H. Asquith, Walter Bagehot, Lord Randolph Churchill, T. H. Green, Frederic Harrison, Thomas Humphry Ward, T. H. Huxley, Max Müller, Leslie Stephen, Arnold Toynbee, and the not yet married Beatrice Potter.

Himmelfarb's second advantage is her cool judiciousness. Yes, the 1840s were marked by famine and unemployment, the Chartist uprisings at home and Home Rule uprisings in Ireland, and the social upheavals of increasing industrialization including the new promises and threats of the railway. It was indeed a decade of uncertainty and anxiety. And yet, Himmelfarb says, "In retrospect, some of these events seem less cataclysmic than they appeared to be at the time." Other historical dramas (the Crimean war, the Fenians) are "less momentous than they have sometimes been made out to be." Himmelfarb does not hesitate to offer gentle corrections even to such impressive assessors of their time as Carlyle and Mill. She understands why Carlyle would lament an age "at once destitute of faith and terrified at scepticism," why Mill would see an age of "intellectual anarchy." At the same time, however, she points to the powerful social influence inspired by faith, particularly the evangelical revival in its odd compatibility with another burgeoning faith, utilitarianism (in this she joins with G. M. Young, who first discussed their unlikely marriage in his seminal "Portrait of an Age").

In short, Himmelfarb exercises an attentive moral judgment, an activity that Victorian consciences would have applauded. She does, however, ruefully fear that they might not approve of her careful—and clearly indicated—cuts to the essays. We probably will. Who among us might not wilt before Macaulay's 105-page review of a sixteen-volume edition of Bacon? Himmelfarb doesn't include it, but she points out that the mere knowledge of the existence of Macaulay's essay is important:

it tells us something ... about the spirit of the age: about a journal like the *Edinburgh* that would commission a review of the collected works of Bacon; about the author of the review who, if he did not read all of those sixteen volumes, read enough to write about them at such length (from India, moreover, where, as a member of the Supreme Council of the East India Company, he was busy reforming the Indian system of education and legal code); and, not least, about the "general reader" ... who was expected to read an essay on that subject, at that length, by an anonymous author.

Even though the productive energy of the Victorians has become legendary, facts about them can still seem downright unbelievable: the year 1859 alone saw 115 new periodicals hit the stands; the weekly *Penny Magazine*, run by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, had a high circulation of 200,000—but they decided to stop publishing when circulation dropped to 40,000. Even the expensive, and highest browed, journals had large readerships (especially when you consider that each copy was read by several people): "In their heyday, the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* [the Whig and Tory Reviews] sold 12,000 to 14,000 copies each (a figure that compares favorably with comparable journals in the United States today, in a population almost twenty times that of

England at the time).” Here’s your chance to rival the *Quarterly Review*.

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