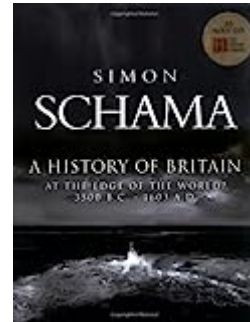


Simon Schama. *A History of Britain: At the Edge of the World? 300 B.C.-1603 A.D.*
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Only a fool would try to review this book as if it were an academic textbook or monograph. It is by a very well-known academic, but it is neither. It is a manifestation of two phenomena. One is the new relationship between the most potent of the new media—television—and history. Then within this general phenomenon there is the extraordinary phenomenon of Simon Schama. The first phenomenon is the easier to explain, and it forms the framework within which printed books of this kind and quality (material and mental) are generated. This is a “book of the series.” To be precise it is the book of the first half of the series, going from an improbable 3000 BC to the point at which its ostensible subject becomes a bee in the bonnet of the first Stuart king to reign over the three kingdoms of Scotland, England and Ireland. James VI & I declared himself King of Great Britain by proclamation, but it must be added that he never did persuade his subjects to merge the distinct names and polities of England and Scotland into a combined realm of Great Britain. That had to wait until 1707, when the United Kingdom of Great Britain was created, lasting until 1800, when it became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

With the multiplication of television channels and the extension of viewing hours, there are now vast amounts of viewing time that has to be filled somehow. It cannot be entirely filled with mindless sitcoms, sports events, or

even news and weather. In the UK (incidentally, now the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), history has become one of the standard stocking fillers, alongside other academic subjects such as geology. The zoologists in a sense were always in there, because the media people spotted early that programs on nature attracted large audiences. The presenters, however, tended to be independent entrepreneurs and academics have come in, so to speak, on their tails. Archaeology is the bit of history that has lent itself most easily to presentation on television in the style that we have come to associate with the better geology or nature programs. There is an element of practical activity, from digging to facial reconstruction on a partially-preserved skull, which makes for virtual involvement by the audience, plus the “lost treasure” syndrome, or what one may call the “Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark” option. The trouble with source-based history is that it opens the floodgates to two problems.

The first is the essentially mindless nature of the television medium. Its 30-second long visual slots inherently lend themselves to over-simplification, not least because of the appallingly limited minds of those who commission and make these films. In the UK it is quite common for an academic to be hired to present material into which he or she has had no input, though the viewer will

inevitably think otherwise. A circular was on my email yesterday asking for such a person. The only requirement was that the person be young, to establish rapport with the target audience, which was under 30. Now some of this was already a problem in the last days of radio. Simon Schama reminds us in the preface of this book that in his youth there was a radio series which consisted mainly of unreconstructed readings from Sir Winston Churchill's multi-volume history of the English-speaking peoples. That history, published after 1945, was largely a product of Churchill's spell of virtual unemployment in the later 1930s. It tells one more about the romantic delusions in Churchill's mind than about history.

The second problem is that nowadays a TV history series can have violent bias built in from the start. For example, I was recently approached by a freelance writer of television programs. He had been urged by a Channel Four producer to write a series on Queen Elizabeth I and the founding of the British Empire. He had in effect been told to write it in a way that would maximize the feelings of guilt and shame in British viewers. I became a non-person by pointing out that Elizabeth had no interest in empire let alone a British one; wished only to die ruling what she inherited; and that if there is a distant founder of a British Empire it is the bow-legged Scot James VI. This is typical, particularly of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Which brings us to Simon Schama. He is by common consent the cleverest thing that came out of Cambridge (England) in the 1960s. He was one of a viciously competitive group of post graduates. Since your average Cambridge postgrad represents the English lower middle classes clawing their way up through education and there are not enough academic jobs in Cambridge to go round, the atmosphere tends to be mephitic at the best of times. It has to be said that, atypically, Schama has always projected a relaxed and amiable personality of real charm, a factor that made his contemporaries even more jealous. His progress from jobs in Cambridge and then from Oxford to Harvard seemed effortless. The fantastic impact he has made since reaching Harvard has been the result of two factors. One has been the writing of very large and successful, though at times whimsical, books. He has described himself as a happy academic hamster trundling round on his writing wheel. The other has been his huge exposure on television. The man is a media star and celebrity.

But was it sensible to pressure, as the BBC clearly did, a man who has never been a committed historian of

Britain into the series that gave birth to this book, which admittedly is different from the series? The series could not convey more than a fraction of the historical data in even this far from dense text. A lot of the film coverage was almost elegiac with shots of the romantic figure of Schama walking around historic sites musing melliflously in soft light. He must know that he does not have a profound grasp of the literature, let alone the sources. This book summarizes a selection of the better recent literature at a level which is acceptable. There are alarming signs in the continuation of the series beyond 1603, currently being screened, that when Schama tries to spread his wings, the result can be unfortunate.

Schama was primarily a historian of the Dutch Republic and its successor states in the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon, who then wrote a big book on the French Revolution. Do the high quality of the paper and printing and the many superb color illustrations made possible by this commercial context compensate for the fact that Schama is no medievalist let alone a historian of the Roman Empire, and even less of a pre-historian? He obviously had help. He needed it. That he had not lived in the UK for twenty years was no handicap, but that he has to deal with what he shrewdly describes as the religious civil wars of the gentiles, without any track record of that scholarship, is a sobering thought. It would frighten me, who am a British historian in every sense, to even try. Quite clearly, the situation limits what Schama can do. This is mainly high political narrative, dashing and breezily done, with wit and humor devoid of venom. Schama is aware of the recent research which shows that the Peasants Revolt of the fourteenth century was not a rising of the poorest of the poor, but of the more prosperous sections of the rural commons. Nevertheless, I cannot see my medieval, and much less my Tudor, colleagues learning much from this book. The overall message is glued on at the end. It is like the advice given to the black novelist Chester Himes by the man who commissioned the first of the detective novels which became the Harlem Cycle: keep the action going and don't worry about the overall sense of it until the end.

Despite the BBC wanting Schama for all the wrong reasons (and despite the limitations on his knowledge of the field) the result in both the television series and in this book is not an unhappy one, though it is no great event in historiography. It is likely to be as successful and ephemeral as many of the late A.J.P. Taylor's books and television performances. The key is the relatively modest level of Schama's ambition and self-image. Since he is very intelligent as well as charming, his unassum-

ing approach brings out the best in him. I have yet to talk to a professed Scottish historian with a high opinion of his treatment of Mary Queen of Scots. Yet for an expatriate metropolitan Englishman he does well to talk about the history of the now British peoples in this distant era with some sense of the fact that they are a complex group (even today they can be Welsh, English, Scots or Irish) whose past needs to be understood rather than used. This happy outcome was partly accidental. I have just watched him orating self-righteously in the continuation series over the massacres which followed the storming of Drogheda and Wexford in the War of the Three Kingdoms. Something fresh needed to be said on this topic, but Schama has no apparent knowledge of the conventions of early modern warfare with respect to an assault on an indefensible position summoned but refusing to surrender; nor of the similar contemporary mas-

sacres in Dundee and Kirkcaldy in Scotland (where only Scots were massacred so I suppose they do not count); let alone of the crucial case of Bristol, where a sane decision by Rupert to surrender averted a similar massacre, and angered Charles I, ever anxious to fight to the last drop of his subjects' blood. When he thinks he knows more than he does Schama is like the rest of us. Let us meanwhile be grateful for small mercies, one of which is this particular book.

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