

Seeing the past: Simon Schama's *A History of Britain* and public history*

Review Number:

296

Publish date:

Friday, 1 November, 2002

Author:

Simon Schama

Date of Publication:

2001

Publisher:

BBC

Publisher url:

<http://www.bbcshop.com/History/Complete-History-of-Britain-DVD/inv/t/bbcdvd2319>

Place of Publication:

UK

Reviewer:

Justin Champion

'The poetry in history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once on this earth, on this familiar spot of ground walked other men and women as actual as we are today, thinking their thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall be, gone like ghost at cock-crow'.⁽¹⁾

I

History made for television can do this. It can take you to the familiar spot of land, into the castles and cathedrals, through the country houses and fields, into the bedrooms and private places. You can look out of the windows royal prisoners looked out of, or sit at the tables they ate off. You can ponder the words they wrote, and hear the clash of swords, and the thunder of horses' hooves. Portraits, tapestries, skulls, coins, statues, all speak of the dead who once were. In Simon Schama's *A History of Britain* (16 episodes, BBC 2000-2001) the viewer experiences a rich diversity of the passage of human time in the British islands. In a range of locations, from the stone age coastal settlement on the west mainland of Orkney at Skara Brae, through French, West Indian, North American, and Asian places all the way to Wigan Public library, Schama leads the viewer, as it were by the hand, through a first-class tour of 'our' history. Startling landscapes, brooding forests, stark ruins and tempestuous seas provide ample context for describing the development, evolution and confirmation of the geographic and imagined boundaries of tribal and national identities. A recurring and powerful image, reinforcing the natural boundaries of the island, is of crashing surf and precipitous cliffs. As well as the flora, the fauna of the land have a starring role. Deer, ravens, hawks, rats, horses, and rather more exotic creatures like leopards, provide illustration and metaphor for the dynamic of the stories. The camera work and photography is spectacular and enchanting; sinuous general views, meandering close ups, and dramatic lighting mesh to display a succession of beautiful, evocative and powerful images. The camera-work is, at the same time both intimate and compelling, magisterial and

anatomical, presenting the viewer with a backcloth of powerful images over which spoken commentary and/or musical themes gather purpose. The editing of these components – image, commentary, reconstruction – is masterful, in parts absolutely so, driving forward the narrative with energy and passion. In places the montage of images, landscape, spoken sources and musical accompaniment provides the viewer with entertainment and instruction for the eye and ear, the imagination and the mind.

We see kings and queens, princes and courtiers, ordinary peasants, foot-soldiers and generals, slaves and workers, priests and heretics, revolutionaries and dictators, fanatics and children. We see where they lived worked, loved, played, plotted and died. At points we see reconstructions of people actually doing these things too. We also hear them: Welsh, Irish and Scottish voices as well as regional accents from the north, south, east and west of England. The inanimate residue of our past is also made to speak to the viewer: the cultural function and meaning of plain church walls, of hearths, of gardens are all presented with explanation and commentary. Leading all of the programmes from pre-title sequence to concluding voice over inviting viewers to pursue the issues and themes raised in the previous hour is the presenter who delivers over 300 addresses direct to camera (known as ‘Pieces To Camera’ [PTCs]) and voice-over commentary. We see Schama in location, peering through ruins, emerging from dungeons, walking hilltop ridges, handling objects, on beaches, explaining context, summarising narratives and describing events. The presenter is the thread that runs through each programme and between each episode, providing continuity and familiarity.⁽²⁾ Unlike a book, here the historian is a visual presence (rather than a voice submerged in the reader’s consciousness). The physicality of this presence, the aspect of performance and engagement is critical to the historical authority of the project. Such televisual history contrives to be ‘the foam and sparkle on the broad sea of historiography’.⁽³⁾ Its function is instrumental: to attract the viewer to plunge into the deeper reaches of knowledge about the past.

II

The rise of public history in a variety of media (television, radio and the web), but especially on the television, raises all sorts of issues about the epistemological status of the ‘history’ presented in this medium. Despite at least four decades of public broadcasting, there has been little systematic attempt to engage with the epistemic ‘form’ of televisual authorship. A common and lamentable response has been to dismiss such products as intellectually feeble, shaped by demands of entertainment rather than erudition and instruction. As a number of historians have insisted, history is always best presented in the traditional form of printed books or learned papers. Even this rather bold assertion of the priority of ‘written’ history, might have been a starting point for trying to think through how the conventions of print scholarship can be translated to the electronic media. Many historians are powerfully dismissive of the entire enterprise of making public history, protective of their intellectual ownership of the discipline, and fearful of film-makers as usurpers of their knowledge and academic status. This is enormously shortsighted, both for the future of the discipline qua academic subject, and as a discourse that has had ambitions of communicating with a broader public.

The world of electronic media is not necessarily an agent of academic decay and declining standards. In some areas of traditional erudition the new media have exercised a profound, liberating and positive impact upon research strategies and output. The shining examples of Jerome McGann’s Rossetti project and *The Newton Project* based at Imperial College, London show how the facilities of web-based databases and the technology of hyper-text links can provide new academic resources, which are also available to a broader public.⁽⁴⁾ The electronic edition of a canonical text is capable of mobilising many more resources to be at the disposal of the academic researcher than those contained in the material form of a printed text. This is not to dismiss or traduce the traditional forms of publication and communication, but simply to point out that new and unfamiliar ‘forms’ of media are not necessarily destructive or corrosive of academic potential. However, some historians are resolutely convinced that ‘history’ should, and must, remain the privilege of a learned community, cloistered between the (preferably) hardback covers of the scholarly monograph. This is a myopic position that fails to recognise the historically contingent association between erudition and print culture. The impact of a range of new public media (TV, radio, the internet) raises fundamental arguments about whether historical ‘truth’ is simply confined to the material form of print culture. Much of the literary technology of scholarly communication (footnotes, indexes, transcriptions) has been designed and developed

by historical practice over the past two millennia. It has not reached an end point yet.

If one was to make a brief survey of the growth of the literary forms of historical scholarship and criticism, from antiquity to the twentieth century (perhaps put overly simply as the transition from scroll to codex), it would be possible to describe a story that bound in the increasing credibility and authority of historians and historical writing with the invention of a series of literary devices. As Anthony Grafton has elegantly established, the invention of the footnote was a manifestation of a culture of witnessing, testimony and citation, which was rooted deep in the rhetorical foundations of historical thinking.⁽⁵⁾ Although footnotes are fundamental to the invocations of creditable and 'true' history witnesses, they are still only an historical product. Clearly one can have claims to historical credibility without the supporting fetish of 'citation'. A recent example of this can be seen in the reception of works like John Brewer's *Pleasures of the Imagination* (HarperCollins; London, 1997) or Blair Worden's *Roundhead Reputations* (Allen Lane; London, 2001). Both works are mature products of eminent historical minds writing at the height of their powers. Because of an intention to communicate with as broad an audience as possible, both works eschew the heavy scholarly apparatus of footnotes, in favour of prose that engages and persuades. Although some reviewers have made critical comments on the absence of references, no serious reader can suggest that the academic integrity or historical authority of the content of the books has been compromised.

Over the centuries historians have been clever at developing cultural strategies for avoiding the charges of bias and subjectivity. Some of these claims have been exposed to scrutiny under the recent assault of literary theorists and philosophers of language. While here is not the place to explore the challenge of post-modern critical theory, it is perhaps enough to underscore the thrust of much of this engagement, which makes the distinction between the past and writing about the past to expose the essentially literary quality of history. Historians make 'truth claims' in a particular historical form; as Hayden White explained many years ago, there are a variety of meta-historical tropes which underpin this communication.⁽⁶⁾ There are also new forms and media: television being one of the more insurgent phenomena.

Despite the recent tyranny of the footnote, historical writing has always been primarily a mode of public communication concerned to describe, challenge, even legitimate some form of political or religious institution, cultural value or ethical proposition. Even the apostle of modern objectivity Ranke preferred to preserve the literary quality of his historical writing at the expense of his references, pleading with his first publisher to keep the transcriptions and citations in a separate volume.⁽⁷⁾ As a form of moral discourse, 'history' has had cultural value as a medium of public communication. Whether it be Herodotus memorialising and entertaining, Thucydides analysing and describing, or even Gibbon casting philosophical dictum, historical writing has always had an author and an audience. The historian aims at telling some sort of plausible truths about something that had happened, inevitably drawing conclusions pertinent to some moral concern.

This aspect of public communication has been marginalised in recent decades, as much of the methodological and theoretical investigation has been focused upon the philosophical and epistemological dimensions of historical argument. The concern with 'truth' and objectivity as primary problems has deflected from the broader cultural and rhetorical function of the discourse. Many of the recent excursions into the nether world of francophone theory have avoided engagement with questions of audience, reception and the reading of history. Raising the question of what is the ideal audience (our colleagues, 'students' or the 'general public') and how this determines the form of the communication, and the function of the 'truth' discussed, is seldom heard. The sins of falsification, forgery and propaganda bedevil much of our inward reflection as a community, perhaps because there is still a very powerful function for the accurate historical record. Claims to represent the past 'truthfully' have genuine public status, as recent developments in the David Irving case only too evidently exemplify. Historians are cautious and almost embarrassed by the public status of their discipline. Nowadays it is very rare for academic historical works to use the word 'true' in their titles; only the most lurid popular work would dare use the word, almost by default prompting scepticism about the integrity of its contents.

Popular history is not bad history. When written with integrity and moral purpose it is simply history written

and communicated in a different way. One of the most popular historians, if we make the award by book sales, is the children's author Terry Deary who has sold over eight million volumes in the last decade. His 40 titles have been translated into thirty languages; his books account for 17 out of every 20 borrowed from children's libraries.⁽⁸⁾ These books are entertaining. They have cartoons, games and quizzes which all aid the digestion. Deary has acknowledged he writes because 'I want to change the world'. Convinced that history is a means of communicating with a variety of audiences, Deary does this on a bed-rock of factual truth. His writing is passionate and entertaining, truthful and subjective: most importantly, it works. Academic historians no doubt have barely deigned to open a copy of the *Stormin Normans* or the *Terrible Tudors*, but if they did they might well be struck by the depth of research and acuity of characterisation. Quite clearly, Deary's books are designed for a particular audience and written in an appropriate style: who is to say that his volumes contain more or less 'truth' than the equivalent volumes of the *Oxford History of England*? As Arthur Marwick, one of the most vocal commentators on the business of historical writing, has recently reminded us, 'the main point I want to make is that a work of history should be judged by what it is setting out to do, by the level it is aiming to operate on'.⁽⁹⁾

III

In order to make fair assessment of the value of *A History of Britain* one needs to engage (in Marwick's words) with 'what it is setting out to do'. Fortunately this is possible to do from a variety of public sources. Most significantly Schama has described his own intentions in his 'The Burden of Television History', a keynote speech delivered to the *World Congress of History Producers* in Banff (2001). As way of introduction it is quite clear that Schama as a master historian has thought long and hard about the historical form. As the case of his own *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (Granta in association with Penguin Books; London, 1991) shows, he has experimented with the boundaries between historical writing and fiction. His own printed *oeuvre* is both original in content and diverse in form. Without exception it is clear that he gives priority to clarity and elegance of prose: words are the primary tool of enchantment and persuasion. The intellectual thrust of *Dead Certainties* in particular, indicates that Schama has reflected at length on the business of communication. This has resulted in other, perhaps more adventurous televisual programmes about the murder of a Harvard professor in 1849.⁽¹⁰⁾

In 'The Burden of Television History', Schama pondered the recent rediscovery that history has an appeal as 'mass entertainment', speculating that as a form of 'time travel with happy endings [in the] costumed country of the imagination', there is a temptation to see such products as a form of cultural escapism.⁽¹¹⁾ Schama's commitment is to more than this: as he explains (in the context of September 11th) 'it's more incumbent than ever on us to aim a little higher than escapist time travel; to recognise that history means most, has done most, has been a least frivolous luxury and most an urgent necessity, when it has freely and willingly assumed its heavy burden of tragic instruction'. Quite explicitly the assertion is made that it is a moral duty for the serious historian to produce TV history that engages with the 'thorny difficulty of truth'. Such a 'cautionary history' can educate a broad audience into engaging with the pressing issues of national identity, cultural pluralism and civic tolerance. Schama is also quite clear about what he did not want to produce. His intention was to eschew televised tourism: 'a stroll down memory lane, stopping off at the obligatory stately home and Ye Olde Tea Shoppe; the Antiques Roadshow with ruins'. Again deliberately invoking the example of Macaulay, *A History of Britain* was intended to appeal to the imagination and the mind. Fully aware that there was a fundamental tension between the injunctions of rigorous academic scholarship and the aesthetic aspirations of story-telling film-makers, *A History of Britain* was intended to transcend the traditional structure of historical documentaries exploiting archive footage, academic talking heads (one-on-one interviews) and voiceover commentary. Boldly he made the prediction, 'the future of history, the survival of history is going to depend at least as much, if not more on the new media and television as on the printed page'.

In attempting to characterise his approach to the making of public history, Schama identified four components that were compounded to make engaging and instructive programmes. These qualities are 'immediacy', 'empathy', 'moral engagement' and 'poetic connection'. Fundamental to the programmes was 'immediacy': what was defined as 'the audibility or the visibility of contemporary witness'. Put simply, this

was allowing historical sources to have a place in the narrative structure of a programme. In the series this was a sophisticated and complex business, fundamentally shaped and led by the presenter. In each and every episode the flow of history was punctuated by historical voices; sometimes this involved a voice other than Schama's, reading out extracts from a particular source, accompanied by rostrum images of the source or a montage of landscape and reconstruction. This was a powerfully effective way of allowing original 'primary' sources to penetrate the structure of the narrative. Among the many moments where this achieved something beyond the capabilities of print media was in the very first programme, when extracts from a cache of letters left by members of the community living around Hadrian's wall were read out over a montage of images of the letters themselves, general views of the location and some dramatic reconstruction. This moment was prefaced by Schama describing the discovery of the correspondence and inviting the viewer to 'imagine' the everyday lives of these ordinary people. Later in the series similar moments (the Paston Letters, or the divisions within families during the 1640s) are also effectively delivered. These moments of 'immediacy' can be thought of as forms of visual citation, replicating the business of quotation and footnote reference in a far more human manner.

Crucial to building up the 'truth' of the accounts, these passages involve 'real' sources (not always textual sources and voices, but sometimes objects, described and given meaning by the presenter), establishing a firm empirical structure for the narrative. They also effectively reinforce the authority of the presenter who acts as (in Schama's words) an 'interlocutor between audience and protagonists'. In this role the presenter is a sort of personal companion, contextualising, explaining, stepping back from the action to pass commentary on the significance of an object or voice, or to 'sustain the emotional and psychological momentum of what's just been seen'. Frequently the viewer is invited to 'imagine', or 'imagine yourself' acting out the episode (the battle of Hastings, the death of Becket). In many of these examples there is effective editing to convey immediacy and shared experience. The account of the death of Becket in episode three is a classic example of this immediacy. Moving from a consideration of the technical issues of ecclesiology and jurisdiction, Schama narrates 'all was not as it appeared' over a distorted and unsteady view of cloisters. Images of shutting doors, rostrum shots of contemporary documents, burning torches and upturned tables, inter-cut with reconstructed drama of riding horsemen sets the scene for a walking PTC, narrating the falling out between Henry and Beckett. Cut-away edits to a leaf swept along by the river and thunderous clouds collude to evoke tension and expectation. We all know what's coming, but Schama deliberately and carefully slows the action down, locating the action at a precise day and time 'around three ... around 4:30 in the afternoon'. The knights are named, bells toll. Schama delivers his dramatic PTC, recounting the murder in the exact location, ('Becket was caught up with, [right] in here'). These passages of the films bring immediacy and authenticity. They tell us something of the 'truth' of the events, although they explicitly appeal to visual and aural senses. These moments are not all so dramatic. Schama is just as powerful when in descriptive mode handling an object – the so-called 'Talking heads' (carved statues used by the ancient Druids), the Alfred Jewel, a branding iron, or the foundling momentos of Coram's hospital – teasing out meaning and significance. This is a profound historical skill, communicating the broader message of an obscure artefact. It's difficult to imagine it done more effectively in the medium of print.

The second component of the series was what Schama terms 'imaginative empathy'. In explaining this dimension of the films, Schama used the example of the creative representation of Cromwell's character in 'Revolutions'. Here the passage combines modern drama, footage from Kevin Brownlow's *Winstanley* (1975), with general landscape views of bleak countryside. The objective was to represent the inner moral character of Cromwell's religious fundamentalism by weaving together powerful images. Here the historical intention is supported by the aesthetics of 'film' techniques: the juxtaposition of live drama, with reconstructed and 'managed' shots. The centre-piece of this passage is a tear drop slowly descending the cheek of a young actress who was 'blessed ... with the perfect face to express what all the sects, and especially the Quakers called "the receiving of the light"'. Here cinematic techniques are turned to provide emotional effect, to support an historical argument about the character and intentions of Cromwell. Since the theme of that programme was that 'Albion must be turned into Jerusalem', the artistic efforts were contrived to suggest this different cultural context. Elsewhere, perhaps most dramatically in the presentation of the 'epic romance' of Wallace's struggle against the English state, a combination of reconstructed action,

rostrum shots of contemporary maps, close-ups of swooping hawks, drawn swords, dramatic sunsets and bleak landscapes, accompanied by mournful music, allows the viewer to imagine what it must have been like. In these moments filmic techniques such as the use of tinting and handheld cameras (and even the type of setting or film quality) can be used to emphasise the dramatic or realistic dimensions of the footage. Handheld shots (routinely used in documentary news-type footage) bring action and dynamic qualities to these scenes. The montage of modern reconstructions of action over-laid onto authentic locations and landscapes similarly brings an imaginative immediacy that allows the viewer to empathise with the past.

All of the episodes in the series exploit this essentially filmic process. At its most obvious and straightforward the use of modern reconstruction acts as a vehicle for 'bringing to life' some of the more dramatic events of the past. Painting in images and music, as well as with words, simply brings a more effective range of resources and *color* to the palette. Much of the dramatic reconstruction (especially in the earlier programmes) is military: marching Roman legionaries, marauding Vikings and blood-feuding Anglo-Saxons. Here the shots are designed to evoke rather than describe: again, shooting in black and white, or in 'adjusted' colour and tone footage, are purely photographic techniques for representing events. Such images make a claim both on the imagination and the 'reality' of the historical past. The high point of this is probably the scenes edited in programme two on the Battle of Hastings (*Conquest!*). Here the capacity of the medium to combine a variety of sources, images and sound was powerfully effective. The entire programme was structured around a meditation and engagement with the Bayeux tapestry. Ample footage of Schama in location, examining and explaining the significance of the tapestry, is accompanied by images of women supposedly embroidering the item, underscoring the human dimension of its manufacture. This is a source that was made by humans to represent a certain sort of case. The narrative of the events at Hastings are embedded in the ability of the camera to present a before (then) and after (now) picture of the location at Battle as a premise for thinking about the 'bones beneath the buttercups'. Very cleverly, the extract moves between rostrum shots of moments in the tapestry and real shots in location; images of trees being chopped down in the tapestry overlaid with pictures of a real tree falling reinforce the slippage between historical source and the here-and-now. The presenter's injunction, looking down on the battlefield today, to 'imagine yourself' there, is powerful. The blurred and unsteady footage of real reconstruction, cut with images from the tapestry, plus a soundtrack of battle noise, is impressive. Martin Davidson, producer of the series, identified this extract as a high point technically. An average film of 60 minutes would contain perhaps 400 edits (cuts between general views, rostrum, PTCs, and so on); programme two was made by bringing together 1700 edits. To the historian this may sound like irrelevant boffin-like detail: but it is in the edit room that television programmes are refined and made. The drama and forward drive of a programme (equivalent to the page-turning ambitions of novelists, but not most historians) is the quality that makes it successful.

There are also other purely televisual techniques that benefit the historical dimensions of the programmes. The use of graphics and split screens is an effective way of summarising and juxtaposing ideas and content. The generation of maps to indicate the passage of journeys, or in the case of programme two, the swivelling of the map of England around to make the point that the Norman Conquest turned the nation around from Scandinavia to Europe was very effective. The use of split screen in the programmes dedicated to an account of the Civil Wars saw Charles I facing off against Cromwell, or footage of 'Sealed Knot'-style reconstruction matched against contemporary woodcuts representing chaos and disorder. Here these dialogues between images engage the imagination of the viewer to think harder about the events. One of the most imaginative uses of this technology occurred in the episode devoted to the impact of the Reformation (*Burning Convictions*). Driven by 'one of the most poignant questions in English history – "what did happen to Catholic England?"' – the programme is firmly rooted in ecclesiastical locations. Setting the scene from within an unnamed priory in Norfolk, Schama comments 'there are ghosts in this place'. The historical thrust of the episode is to engage with an incredibly complex historiography about the impact of 'the reformations' on English cultural life. There is an explicit mission both to show how and why this change took place: attention is devoted to political context and personality. The characters of Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey ('Jeeves with an attitude') and Anne Boleyn are given attention (complete with beautiful rostrum portraits to allow a visualisation of the people concerned). The most powerful aspects of this programme are the visual

locations. Footage of modern day Walsingham populated by devout pilgrims and Protestant protestors give the viewer a sense of the still-persisting antagonisms between Catholic and Protestant.

The episode is book-ended by two powerful images. At the conclusion we see Schama emerging from a priest-hole, to reinforce a commentary that suggested Roman Catholicism had become a 'cloak and dagger church ... a faith on the run'. The opening of the programme is dominated by the attempt to reconstruct a 'lost world' of Catholic culture. This is achieved by a skilful blend of montage, commentary and sophisticated graphics. Set in Holy Trinity, Long Melford and exploiting a source written by the recusant Roger Martin in the Elizabethan period recalling the fabric and richness and beauty of worship in the parish before the iconoclasm of Edward's reign, this extract powerfully reconstructs late medieval piety. Footage of the bare walls of the church as it exists today, is accompanied by voiceover readings from Martin's account (in a Suffolk regional accent) describing the furnishings and iconography of the church. Carvings, rood-screens, paintings of the apostles, statues of the Virgin are described in meticulous and pious detail. As the voiceover describes the stained glass, the painted walls, the wood-carvings, by use of graphic software, the plain white footage of the interior of Holy Trinity is slowly and incrementally painted in, to become a glorious riot of colour illuminated by the flickering light of candles. This is an imaginative reconstruction, painted colour spiralling up the columns, or blocking in the windows. It is unclear how exactly historically accurate this might be, but it makes the point far more powerfully than even the most elegant and imaginative of printed accounts can manage.⁽¹²⁾ The transition from this visual experience to the close covert surroundings of the priest's hole is an effective visual device for explaining the fate of Roman Catholic public religion. Here, without dispute, televisual history is a superb medium for the communication of historical insight. It is not unique in the series either; other high points where camera image and commentary collude to reinforce the majesty of historical evidence can be seen in the presentation of Ruben's *Apotheosis of James I* in the Banqueting House.

The third important dimension of the programmes identified by Schama is what he labels 'Candid moral engagement'. Schama has not delivered, and never intended to deliver, dispassionate history. Committed to what he describes as 'television that simultaneously kick-starts the imagination while not sending the mind to sleep' ⁽¹³⁾, *A History of Britain* has arguments and ideas. It engages with processes of nation building and state formation; it describes holocausts and persecutions; it condemns where it sees need; it readily identifies 'turning-points' and transforming events. Speaking about Edward I's project for dominion in terms as the most 'colossal exercise in colonial domination anywhere in Europe', or condemning the 'ethnic cleansing' of the islands of Jews in the 1290s, indicates a clear-minded moral tone to all of the programmes. The inclusion of the voices of the oppressed Celtic nations (spoken by actors in regional accents) and their 'expression of national identity' (accompanied by Irish pipes), as well as the unconditional censure (in the spoken commentary) of the conduct of the Civil wars ('Eden had become Golgotha') and in particular the 'war crimes' of Cromwell in Ireland, or Butcher Cumberland in eighteenth-century Scotland, show an unambiguous commitment to the moral function of history. The episode devoted to 'the exhilarating and terrible story of how one small group of islands came to dominate the world' (*The Wrong Empire*) engages head-on with both exploration and exploitation.

Schama deliberately eschews the format of formally weighing and judiciously arbitrating between different historical traditions in *A History of Britain*. In this format this is a good thing. There are the odd allusions to 'some historians' or the fact of the existence of considerable debate about particular events or processes. The intention of *A History of Britain* is, however, clearly not to give an account of the often impenetrable and internecine conflict between historiographies and historians. Televising such material is hard: historians in debate are often intensely focused on particular elements of a subject that may appear recondite or obscure to the general viewer. The technical aspects of filming and editing such conversation and then meshing it into the narrative structure of the programmes are complex. The overriding character of *A History of Britain* is to submerge these arguments and issues into the narrative plot. Schama has commented directly on this aspect of the films when he suggested they introduced 'debate by stealth'.⁽¹⁴⁾ In answer to a question about how it was possible to approach translating 'History' into 'Television', the emphasis was placed upon producing stories with an argument. As he put it, 'We wanted to deliver that question gently and if we could,

enchantingly' to 'seduce people into paying attention'.

It is commonplace for difficult issues of historiography to be represented by a succession of interviews with 'talking-head' experts. This sort of television has been mercilessly parodied by the comedians David Baddiel and Robert Newman in their sketch *History Today* (supposedly loosely modelled on the fierce polemical encounters between A.J.P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper) where academic debate soon deteriorates into vicious personal exchanges. There is no doubt that the sort of forensic discussion and presentation of rival opinions can work in the media. Amanda Vickery's recent series, *The Trouble with Love*, driven in one sense by an academic curriculum, needed to engage in detail with the evolution of, and contestations between, different historical viewpoints: this was achieved by plotting discussions and interviews with 'other' voices into the arguments of the programmes.⁽¹⁵⁾ Since these programmes were dealing with issues in the history of cultural ideas (love, emotions, the self), rather than a narrative of events, institutions and individuals, the structure of the visual time was not disrupted, by cut-aways from location or rostrum shots to the cut and thrust of verbal exchange. As Vickery has commented, she realized from the outset that the thematic history would be more palatable if conveyed via stories. Therefore, in each episode, she took a case study/source that exemplified a problem, paradox or particular context. The troubadour lyrics around Eleanor of Aquitaine enabled her to recreate some of the culture of courtly love. Lady Anne Halkett's autobiography revealed the balance of love, honour, security and passion among the civil war gentry. A 1740s church court case uncovered the rules, rituals and pitfalls of courtship before Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753. Shelley's poetry and letters exemplified a radical vision of free love. Rosamond Lehmann's letters and novels captured the attempt to find 'modern love' after the Great War. And finally the reminiscences of Maureen Freely, David Self and Frank Longstreth were used to chart changing mores in the wake of the permissive legislation of the late 1960s. The challenge of these programmes lay in interweaving the narrative, the history of ideas, and the cultural context of the period under discussion into one coherent package. To hold the three threads in tension, all the while entertaining the viewer at 7.30 p.m. (a time when programme makers do not expect to have the audience's full attention) was Vickery's burden.

A History of Britain produced sixteen programmes that combined a narrative of events across a period, with a broader historical argument illustrated or illuminated by those stories. In one sense, Schama is explicitly attempting to replicate in a modern medium what historians in classical antiquity thought was a morally appropriate function for 'history', that is, 'teaching philosophy by examples'. History is never simply the 'when and how', but also the 'why and what it means'. Just as ancient historians (and in fact most practitioners up until the nineteenth century) were steeped in the injunctions and techniques of eloquence and rhetoric, so Schama knows how to manage his texts, images and words to persuade and convince, as well as entertain. The purpose of such ancient history was very often to educate a political elite into the *arcana* of civic life: to teach principles of political prudence, diplomatic strategy or military prowess. The point of history was that it taught one something valuable about the way the world worked. *A History of Britain* too, has these ambitions. Throughout the programmes one is encouraged to ponder the moral role of leaders and kings, the processes of state-building (the relationship between tax and war, or between political power and representative institutions) or broader cultural matters such as the connections between religious authority and minority rights.

In *The Wrong Empire* Schama engages with the creation and legacy of British imperial ambitions and achievements. Here, in about an hour, he covers the American colonies, the slave trade in the West Indies, and the growth of imperial power in India. This is impressive. Some responses have made the criticism that the programme covered too much ground in too short a time. The programme again blended reconstruction with powerful shots of locations in America, the West Indies and India. Schama's emotional account of the appalling conditions experienced by African slave in transportation and on the plantations, is reinforced by the fact that his commentary is delivered while handling (and then describing) a branding-iron. The tone of moral condemnation is explicit and profound. This is history with a cutting edge. It may only be a starting point for engaging with the more detailed accounts and historiography, but everyone has to start somewhere. In the programme the experience of slavery is presented in a number of visualised and aural ways. We see chained feet walking on beaches, hear brutal accounts of life on board ships, view rostrum shots of

contemporary drawings, accompanied by a commentary that gives an analysis of the profits and benefits to plantation owners. One of the supporting images adding to authentic description of life and labour on the plantations is film footage (archive) of sugar making from a Barbadian location. This 'archive' footage is clearly genuine, and it supports the 'truth' of the appalling conditions in which men, women and children laboured in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However effective this moment is at expressing a valid and acceptable condemnation of imperial economics, some historians have expressed concern about the practice of using such footage. As Schama acknowledges elsewhere, these archive shots are from a private film shot in the 1930s 'but using technology which had hardly changed in two hundred years'. Anxieties about 'misuse' of sources and anachronism seem misplaced here. The section of the film includes modern reconstruction, contemporary voiceover and commentary; the Barbadian footage provides powerful supporting witness to the material conditions. The function of these pictures is to make us see history and think about it; it is not to provide a reconstruction of the past 'as it was'. Once again the importation of the ambitions and protocols of referencing and citation from print culture are simply not relevant in this media. Throughout the programmes, Schama does build empirical and material credibility for his commentaries and arguments through speaking in locations ('it happened here'), handling artefacts ('this branding iron was used for ...') and pointing to sources ('these letters say', 'Magna Charta argued'). As viewers, we have confidence in the moral tone of the arguments and commentary because the account is plausible and persuasive. Unlike when (as academic historians) we read each other's published work and forensically pore over footnote references and accuracy of citation, we ought to watch a programme to get the overall point, to enjoy the images, to consider the wider issues. Unlike perhaps the majority of the public, academic historians need to learn to watch and listen to such programmes in different ways than they are accustomed to consume 'scholarship'.

Each of the programmes in *A History of Britain* engages with a general argument. Here Schama uses the 'pre-title' section of each programme to raise issues, to map out the overarching case he will engage with, and to pose some rhetorical questions. In the structure of each episode these 'pre-title' arguments provide a subtle spine around which the narrative weaves. As Schama has pointed out, some of the issues raised were serious and difficult but the charge of the 'author-presenter' abusing his monopoly point of view is rebutted because of the priority of dramatic flow; 'we didn't want the texture of the narrative to be broken by anything close to an academic seminar'. Reinforcing the idea that one of the key functions of this form of history is to act as a prompt and portal to further discussion and investigation, it is important to note that at the end of each programme the presenter invites the audience to pursue the subjects raised in a variety of ways. Certainly the evidence of the BBC website supporting the series indicates that the public took advantage of this.

The final theme Schama defines is what he terms the heart of the matter - 'poetic connection'. Here the series engages with a debate (that once again has its roots in classical antiquity) about the relative merits of poetry, philosophy and history as devices for speaking about what it is to be human. The rise of that (so-called) 'noble dream' the pursuit of historical objectivity, (concomitant with the professionalisation of the discipline) has compromised the poetic and literary dimensions of historical writing. *A History of Britain* is one bold attempt to try to put the majesty of poetic connection back into history. Some of the adjectives that have been used about the programmes express these intentions well: magic, glamour, enchantment – all words that conjure up a world of image, icon and 'representation', rather than the (oftentimes) arid landscape of dense prose and an undergrowth of footnotes. As John Willis commented, 'The direct, personal style and the sheer narrative strength of Starkey and Schama, pull the viewer in so that he or she starts to live the history'. As he explained it was clear that narrative certainty had replaced the 'customary historical process of weighing and assessing evidence'.⁽¹⁶⁾ The benefits of marrying commentary and image with dramatic reconstruction are evident; *A History of Britain* was an attempt at animating the past. Putting the spirit back in, while sticking as broadly as possible to the facts, in order to try to illuminate 'what it means to be human' was the task. As Schama clarified, 'we are in the business of representing something that's no longer there'. It is a mistake to suggest that this means the programmes were intended to reproduce a 'replica' of the past. In language derived more from theatrical discourse than Elton's *Practice of History*, Schama explains, 'what we do is persuade our readers or our viewers to suspend their disbelief; to spend a while imagining they are

indeed in a world akin, I suppose to dreams or memories, a fugitive universe’.

When historians have criticised Schama they often forget that *A History of Britain* is a series of films rather than successive chapters in a book. The filmic quality of this history is fundamental to its intentions. It is worth pausing here to tease these issues out for proper consideration because the discipline, aesthetics and even logistics of making films is remote from the craft of researching, writing and publishing books, and is not commonly encountered by historians. Martin Davidson, a key figure in making the programmes, points this out when he summarised the project which was six years in the making and involved film-making worldwide. Originally conceived as comprising 26 parts, the first issue was resolving the problem of delivering a series over months of viewing time. As he commented, ‘we knew the series would stand or fall on the quality of its narrative, with the dramatic power of its big story unfolding through countless smaller, concrete details’. Adopting a ‘classical approach’ marrying narrative, location, and reconstruction, *A History of Britain* ‘would avoid gimmicks, and would try to marry the drama and eloquence of Simon’s script, to photography of the highest order’. The priority was then to make a series that people would watch and stay watching, which preserved the authenticity of historical integrity.⁽¹⁷⁾ Film and factual detail do not necessarily mesh together.

The tensions between what academic historians regard as scholarship and the protocols of the aesthetic dimensions of filmmaking are legend. One historian has commented, ‘No matter how serious or honest the filmmakers, and no matter how deeply committed they are to rendering the subject faithfully, the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian as historian (although it may satisfy the historian as filmgoer). Inevitably, something happens on the way from the page to the screen that changes the meaning of the past as it is understood by those of us who work in words.’⁽¹⁸⁾ Typically (according to polemical parody), historians want to stuff the screen with verbal footnotes and narrative-clogging qualifications, while film-makers simply abuse the historical record to achieve an attractive but fictional picture. In these stereotypes there is both a measure of truth and woeful misunderstanding. Very recently, one historian has excoriated most ‘teleshistory’ for failing to get to grips with evidence and the sifting and assessment of arguments, preferring anachronistic and feeble reconstructions.⁽¹⁹⁾ Both historians and documentary film-makers aim at achieving an engagement with the truth of the past: they simply have different methods and instruments at getting there. These almost incommensurable approaches can be most readily seen in many of the reviews of films that the *American Historical Review* has started to publish. A sample of these from the last few years shows that the tendency of historians reviewing ‘historical’ films is to assess the value of the film in terms of its success in achieving a measure of historical accuracy. Clearly, however, the objective of most (especially Hollywood) directors is not to transcribe the latest finding of historiographical research into celluloid or videotape. The relentless exposure of historical mistakes is what historians are good at, but in the case of film they may be missing the bigger picture. One of the commonly expressed anxieties about such error-strewn work is that such faulty representation of the past will mislead the viewer in to holding inaccurate beliefs about the past. This may be fair, but it is also premised upon an acknowledgement that the medium of film is a powerful one; to repeatedly dismiss it as inadequate and an improper medium for the ‘serious’ business of scholars is to ignore a resource that is a dominant cultural form.

The tensions between scholarship and film are well illustrated in an interview with Ken Burns, one of America’s leading documentary film-makers, for the *American Historical Review* in 1995, which focussed upon the issue of ‘Historical Truth’.⁽²⁰⁾ Burns has produced powerful and well-received series on the American Civil War (1990) and baseball (1994); many of them have won or been nominated for Oscars, Emmys and Peabodys. He describes himself as a storyteller and an ‘amateur’ historian. His objective as a film-maker is to communicate with a broad audience, ‘some would say, [to] rescue history from those who teach it and the scholars who only wish to talk to themselves about it, and to return history to kind of a broad dialogue’ (p. 742). Despite being beholden to Aristotelian poetic in appealing to emotion rather than intellect, Burns insists that authentic engagement with the past is upper-most in his films. Discussing Jean Luc Godard’s sentiment that film is ‘truth 24 times a second’, Burns responds by insisting that ‘It’s also lying 24 times a second ... I think we have to remember that it’s *all* selection. Just as the scholar, when he

writes *this* sentence, he has not written a hundred million *other* sentences'. (p. 757) The point to reinforce here is that a director of a film has a different set of 'limitations' in constructing a programme: time, visual clarity and structure, as well as the uncertainties of performance and material factors (access to locations, lighting conditions, weather, etc.). There are different rules of the game, but as Burns powerfully points out, there is 'overlap' between discourses. To borrow a theme from Burns, it is possible for an historian to write a book about Oliver Cromwell and liberty, but also for an opera, a ballet, a sculpture, or a play to be produced on the same subject; all of these activities will have some sense of authenticity, some point. Historians prefer to read history books; the general public may prefer television.

One of the frequent words used by film-makers is 'rhythm'. Comparing the experience of reading a book with watching a programme is instructive. As Burns summarises, reading a book is a variable process: 'you could read a paragraph and then set it aside and come back to it, read that again, [even] speed-read through the thing'. Watching a film is about sequencing and ordering a very different experience. (p.759) The decisions about the content and structure are driven by the need to produce pace and thereby keep the viewer interested. The final product is based, though, upon the sort of scholarly work any historian would recognise: 'it is ... an archival, retrieval, research – huge research – job at every aspect. The hands-on, painstaking relationship to the evidence of the past [requires] that I will spend five and a half years on *The Civil War*, ... four and a half years on *Baseball*.' (p. 760-61). The process of collection and analysis in this sort of work involves both historical method and most frequently real, live historians; it is simply that the final output is in a different form. These tensions between method and product, between what we could call television, documentary and history have also been evident in other major British series like the *World at War* (Thames Television, 1975). Classically described (like *A History of Britain*) as a 'landmark in the history of television', the 26-part series has been commended as both good history and good television. (21) Nevertheless, there were frictions between the television-makers and the historians, most profoundly over the 'script' and its length. As Chapman comments, 'the historian invariably wishes a script to impart more information than a documentary maker considers appropriate'. Put simply if there is too much detail the programme becomes too dense for the audience to engage with. At its most fundamental, this is a practical requirement of the medium that ought to be acknowledged by academic historians.

If we think of the process of making 60 minutes of film from the point of view of the director, it may be possible to bring home to the academic historian the practicability of what the medium requires. Making a film could be thought of as boiling down the content and time of a standard lecture into a 10-15 minute slot. (22) Take any subject – the Third Reich, the English Reformation, the Norman Conquest, the Empire – and try to outline what the key elements of a presentation would be. Inevitably in this process one will have to exclude all sorts of key events, important facts, subtle digressions and important qualifications. One can imagine that any such exercise, if modelled against the full-length lecture, and then the compound ranks of the broader historiography, would be open to repeated and constant challenge. Schama's achievement is to have attempted to do this for the wide sweep of English history. The techniques of montage and editing that are brought to the screen in *A History of Britain* supplement the written approach of most history. The screen brings a multi-dimensional perspective to the business; at any one moment I can see horses, landscapes, catch glimpses of authentic sources, hear music and commentary. In one sense this is a more challenging experience than simply reading a book. Some historians have dismissed this poetic dimension as a 'sleight of hand'. The power of the editing process bringing together these diverse elements does, as Marwick has suggested, 'violence to the complex problems of historical study' (p. 236). This is to miss the point by a long chalk.

IV

The reception of *A History of Britain* has been exceptional in terms of popular appreciation and participation (both viewing and follow-up activities such as web discussion groups). A minority of commentators and historians have been hostile. The critical response from academic historians (rather than television reviewers) to *A History of Britain* has taken two quite predictable forms. Some have insisted that 'proper' history simply is not suitable for the media. (23) The other general approach has focused on the content rather than the form, and has raised issues about style, narrative and approach. Whereas the thrust of the first

type of criticism laid down charges of ‘dumbing down’ and the fundamentally misguided prospect of having serious history in such a media, much of the second type of complaint focused (inevitably) on what had been left out or what had been included (too many kings and queens, not enough empire, etc.). Will Hutton, writing in the *Observer*, acknowledged that *A History of Britain* was ‘Great television, but is it great history?’. As he explained, ‘We are not watching the History of Britain. The programmes are too selective to constitute a true representation of our history’.(24) Taking on the standard argument that English history is simply much more complicated than that presented in the series, Hutton perhaps made the elementary mistake of referring to ‘The History of Britain’, when in fact the series was very deliberately called ‘A History’. Although the programmes exploit the magisterial tone of the *autor*/presenter, it is clear throughout the programmes that this is a personal view: there are no pretensions to exclusivity. As Schama’s response tartly noted (*The Observer*, 23 June 2002) ‘television history is not just about transcribing learned books onto the small screen’. Other historians, most notably Bruce Lenman in a review of the associated ‘book of the series’ (*H-Net Reviews*), let rip with some pretty hostile remarks. In commenting on the ‘essentially mindless nature of the television medium’ where ‘Its thirty second long visual shots inherently lend themselves to over-simplification, not least because of the appallingly limited minds of those who commission and make these films’, Lenman dismissed the project as ‘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’. Most of this criticism misses the point because it avoids engaging with the work as public history.

In trying to make an assessment of the value of *A History of Britain* we need to think more flexibly about its intentions and also its cultural context. As the newspapers and journals repeatedly proclaim, ‘History is the new cooking/gardening/black/rock and roll’ (delete as appropriate). It is, at the present, at a highpoint in popularity. As a sign of the commercial potential, only recently (October 2002) a new channel (^{UK}HISTORY), devoted to the broadcast of historical documentaries, was launched in partnership between the BBC and Telewest Communications. Ambitious to provide page-turning history, it will broadcast ‘the highest quality history programming, offering the authority, integrity and depth of analysis that British factual programming is famous for’. Importantly, the publicity strategy for the launch of this venture emphasised that it was providing a resource for ‘generations that have previously felt disenfranchised by ‘old school’ history teaching’.(25) A glance at the television schedules illustrates that there is an explosion of historical subjects on display. The quality and form of this public history is enormously diverse. There are some programmes that focus on the material past, combining detective research with the revelation of a lost past – in the case of the successful *Time Team*, literally unearthing history. Other programmes are tied closely to a more focused academic point, providing means for access to distance learning degrees. Some are constructed to provide celebrity ‘entertainment’ in historical form. More recently the *Great Britons* series was an attempt to project a critical and engaged debate about the role of personality in British history: a double-whammy of celebrity presenters defending the public’s heroes and heroines. Some of this recent television history has been innovative. Juniper TV’s production for the Channel 4 series *Plague, Fire, Treason, War* on the Great Plague won a Royal Television Society award for its creative reconstruction and editing of academic opinion and research. It would be foolish to forget the radio too. There have been some genuinely innovative and significant historical programmes in the past years engaging with the histories of language, science and the powerless. Here, although the medium allows for more robust academic exchange, teasing out digressions and qualifications, it is still driven by the task of painting mental pictures and telling stories. Public ‘history’ is thriving, but is also diverse in its form and content. *A History of Britain* is one exemplary model of what can be achieved.

While many historians will acknowledge the achievement, there is still a residual mental reservation: ‘it’s okay, but it’s only television’. There is still a profound sense in which the academy regards such public history as a secondary or marginal business compared with the tasks of preparing ‘learning’ for peer assessment (or even state sponsored Research Assessment Exercises). This is a mistake. One need not go as far as Robert Rosenstone, who has argued in *Visions of the past: the challenge of film to our idea of history* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA, 1995) that visual media have become the dominant form of communicating historical argument in modern culture, to recognise that unless historians engage with such

media they will have no voice. Engagement will require some intellectual retooling. It will also require some deep thinking about the various artistic forms 'history' can assume.(26) Historians have persistently patrolled the boundaries between truth and fiction, proclaiming factual objectivity to be the foundations of their authority. Despite some robust, and philosophically acute, assaults upon the epistemological status of the discipline, the majority of historians think of themselves as doing things with real facts about the past. Even those unconvinced by the empiricism of the dominant discourse and who have embraced the more fashionable languages of 'representations' and 'readings', still (presumably) think their publications have some value at explaining how the world works. Undoubtedly it is possible to unhinge 'historical truth' from the shackles of 'objective' writing. To borrow the words of Natalie Zemon Davis, there is fiction in the archives. Both the general public and academic historians can learn from the representation of these 'truths' in the large and small screen.(27)

Even in the form of print culture historians can learn to engage with the past in a different mode. In recent years, perhaps shadowing the increase in visual media, there has been a growth in literary 'fiction' written in an historical genre.(28) The works of Alfred Duggan and Julian Rathbone have long provided a route for the general reader into the past. More recently there have enormously successful works which exploit historical sources in an effective way: Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (Secker and Warburg; London, 1983), Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (Hamish Hamilton; London, 1989) and most recently, Iain Pears' *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (Jonathan Cape; London, 1997). These works are clearly powerful works of fiction, but they rest upon a foundation of deep historical research. Pears, in addressing an academic seminar in the Institute of Historical Research, pondered the connection between the hours spent crafting his prose, and those spent researching the sources in various Oxford libraries. In works like Pears' and Eco's, 'real' figures, past events and texts are cited, surveyed and adapted. When prompted by a query about whether his account of natural philosophy in the restoration of the 1660s ought to supplant the more heavy academic studies, Pears dissented, insisting that his works were fictions and could not compete with the 'real' history books. Despite this division of cultural status, it is clear that historians teaching the history of science and the intellectual debates of the period do encourage undergraduate historians to read *An Instance of the Fingerpost* as a means of imaginatively encountering a sense of the period. A little like watching *A History of Britain*, reading such novels allows the imagination to work so that we can empathise with the past.

Some novelists have taken this intimacy between the past and fiction even further. William Boyd's recent works, *Nat Tate. An American Artist: 1928-1960* (21 Publishing; Cambridge, 1998) and *Any Human Heart* (Hamish Hamilton; London, 2002), engage with the difficulty of distinguishing true history from true fiction. The first work apparently described the life and work of a little known (and mediocre) artist. Complete with footnotes, citations, images and photographs, the work appears to be a (short) authentic historical account. It is of course a fiction (exposed only after many had welcomed it a justified rediscovery of a marginalized painter). In this (fake) monograph on Tate, Boyd suggested that he had been alerted to the artist's work through the writing of the 'British writer and critic Logan Mountstuart, 1906-1991... biographer, *belle-lettriste*, editor, failed novelist', whose journals he suggested he was editing (*Nat Tate*, p. 11). These journals, with annotation and other scholarly paratexts, were published in 2002, although extracts were evident in the earlier work. Some reviewers have suggested that Boyd's fabrication of Mountstuart's journals are a 'device allowing Boyd to write about 20th-century celebrities in the pastiche idiom of a contemporary observer'.(29) There are various 'celebrity cameos' of Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Woolf, which allow Boyd some literary fun. But the book is attempting much more than just literary cleverness. The form of the fiction is the intimate diary or journal, edited, annotated and indexed; these paratextual apparatuses are intended to make the reader think about the 'historical' status of the text. When we read the journals, do we read them as 'real' historical sources (and therefore try and 'spot' the references to 'real' people'), or as a deliberate fiction calculated for narrative and literary ambitions? Reading the journals (as an historian) is akin to reading 'authentic' sources— they deliver a fractured, meandering, rather sad and unfulfilled life. They have the obscure, unfinished, intriguing elements of 'real' historical sources (biographical dead-ends, unexplained references). As in history, the 'plot' is provided by the life. Like the earlier work *Nat Tate*, Logan Mountstuart's diaries expose the fragility of the boundary between historical truth and fiction. Unanchored from its published form, extracts from the journals would, I suggest, be

difficult to distinguish from historically authentic sources. Boyd is asking the reader to ponder this. Boyd's achievement is to have created a life that is engaging and repellent, tragic and stupid, fantastic and mundane. Having finished the book one hankers after more (Mountstuart's correspondence, the novels, perhaps an exhibition of the paintings he owned?). Such historical fiction whets the appetite for more. This is a comparable effect to that *A History of Britain* delivers: the appeal to imagination is a powerful way of provoking an interest in the past

Timothy Garton Ash has argued recently that the 'frontier between the literature of fact and the literature of fiction is open, unmarked. Some very fine writers stray across it quite casually'. Garton Ash directly discusses Schama's *Dead Certainties* (1991) which contains an eyewitness account of the Battle of Quebec, acknowledged to be a 'fiction' constructed from number of 'real' historical sources. Embracing Schama's plea that 'history as story telling, as literature, must reclaim the ground it has lost to history as science, or pseudoscience', Garton Ash also adds a note of caution: 'from this particular literary device it is not a long step to the postmodernist conclusion that any historian's "story" is as good as any other's.' Acknowledging that in creating a literature of fact, 'we have to work like novelists in many ways. We select. We cast light on this object, shadow on that. We imagine. We imagine what it is like to be that old Albanian woman weeping over the body of her murdered son, or what it was like to be a fourteenth century French serf'.⁽³⁰⁾ All public literature of fact should pass what he terms 'truth tests': they should be subject to moral assessments of facticity and veracity. To fail such tests is to teeter dangerously on an abyss of distortion and lies.

Academic historians have charged *A History of Britain*, and in fact the whole genre of telehistory, with crossing this boundary between a literature of fact and fiction, and therefore by default compromising 'academic' truth. Indeed, it may be possible for each and everyone of us to dissent with the narratives, style and content of Schama's *A History of Britain*: this is quite right. Despite the claims of many critics, such disagreements are not fundamentally about the 'truth' of the past, but about the style and form of communication (rather about the medium than the message). Schama has succeeded in creating a visual 'literature of fact', even though its filmic form may be uncongenial to more traditional historians. Like all good history, the work has provoked debate, raised hackles, and engaged a community beyond the groves of academia in conversation. History that closes the book is dead. *A History of Britain* has exposed the past to new insights, and to new audiences. If academic society can open its eyes (and tune its ears) to these new pictures and sounds, it may have much to learn, but at the same time also discover a new platform for communicating its learning and moral integrity in an energised and enthusiastic public sphere. Martin Davidson defined these ambitions when he commented 'We want *A History of Britain* to become our very own Bayeux Tapestry for the twenty first century, a graphic and gripping account of our place in the British nations, and their place in the world'.⁽³¹⁾ Like the Bayeux tapestry, *A History of Britain* is a powerful document representing the 'truth' of past events in a particular form, from a particular point of view. However much we might dispute specific elements, or even the overall narrative plot, nevertheless engaging with the drama, the details and the power of the story, provides the imaginative audience with ample food for historical thought. The best history can do no more.

December 2002

Notes

* I am grateful to a number of colleagues (both historians and filmmakers) for various conversations that have helped form some of the views developed here: in particular Mike Braddick, Amanda Vickery, Senara Wilson, Helen Britton, Charles Miller, Melissa Fitzgerald, George Conyne and Mark Jenner.

1. G. Trevelyan, *Clio: A Muse* (Longmans & Co.; London, 1913).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Interestingly the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'presenter' indicates some of the different legal and dramatic contexts for the role. '1. One who presents a person to a benefice, or to any position or office, or for a degree; one who formally introduces a person, esp. at court; in quot. 1597, a sponsor. (See also PRESENTOR 1b.) 2. Law. One who makes a presentment (of a fact, or an offence, etc.); =

- PRESENTOR 1a. Now rare. 3. One who makes a present; a donor, giver. 4. One who 'presents' a part in a play; an actor. arch. or Obs. 5. One who presents an address, petition, memorial, an order, bill, cheque, etc. 6. One who (or that which) presents something to the mind or to notice. 7. One who presents or introduces a programme on radio or television. 1967 Listener 24 Aug. 249/2 A few words spoken into a camera by a presenter can smooth..an awkward script.'
3. I am grateful to my colleague Dr Sam Barnish for offering this phrase.
 4. See the websites at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/> [2] and <http://www.newtonproject.ic.ac.uk/>. [3] For a more general overview of other developments see, <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/researchEssays.html> [4].
 5. See A. Grafton, *The Footnote. A Curious History* (Faber and Faber; London, 1997).
 6. See H. White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Johns Hopkins University Press; Baltimore, 1978).
 7. See G. S. Ford, 'A Ranke letter', *Journal of Modern History*, 32 (1960),142-44.
 8. See V. Hislop, 'Fury of a horrible historian', *The Telegraph*, 19 October 2002.
 9. Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Palgrave; Basingstoke, 2001) p. 232.
 10. Shown on BBC2 on 14 December 2002. See the details of the production and episode, and the innovative associated website at <http://www.spypondproductions.com/parkman/index.htm> [5].
 11. See the online version of the lecture, at *The World Congress of History Producers 2001*, <http://www.historyproducers.com/history2001/> [6].
 12. See E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (Yale University Press; London and New Haven, 1992), pp. 37-40.
 13. Simon Schama, BBC History Lecture, delivered 29 May 2002; broadcast on BBC4 on 20 June 2002; full transcript published in *BBC History Magazine* (June 2002).
 14. 'David Frost interview with Professor Simon Schama and Eric Hobsbawm', *BBC Breakfast with Frost*, 26 May 2002.
 15. Amanda Vickery's *The Trouble With Love* (6 parts, September/October 2002 on BBC2).
 16. John Willis, 'Past is perfect', *The Guardian*, 29 October 2001.
 17. See 'The making of *A History of Britain*', http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/hob/making_of_01.shtml [7].
 18. R. A. Rosenstone, 'History in images/History in words: reflections on the possibility of really putting history into film', *American Historical Review*, 93 (1988),1173-85, at p. 1173.
 19. See T. Stearn, 'What's wrong with television history?', *History Today* (December, 2002), pp.26-7.
 20. 'Historical Truth: an interview with Ken Burns', *The American Historical Review*,100 (1995), 741-764. See also R. B. Toplin, 'The filmmaker as historian', *American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1210-27.
 21. James Chapman, 'The World at War: Television, documentary, history', in G. Roberts and Peter M. Taylor (eds), *The Historian, Television and Television History* (University of Luton Press; Luton, 2001), pp. 127-44, at p.127.
 22. Chapman, 'The World at War', p.135.
 23. Or in a slightly more subtle way, have argued that the programme was overly conservative as a piece of TV: see F. Fernandez Armesto, 'How TV's History men get it wrong', *Evening Standard*, 22 April 2002.
 24. The Observer, 16 June 2002.
 25. For an overview of this see S. Jeffries, 'Once more with feeling', *The Guardian*, 28October 2002.
 26. There are some serious engagements with the relationship between film and history. *History and Theory* devoted a special issue to the theme of 'Producing the past: making histories inside and outside the academy', volume 36 (1997). See also R. Rosenstone, 'Does a filmic writing of history exist?', *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), 134-44. N. Z. Davis has engaged with the issue in *Slaves on Screen. Film and Historical Vision* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA, 2000).
 27. For a discussion of Davis' involvement in the film about Martin Guerre see the very useful website of Sharon Howard 'Early modernity on film' (<http://www.earlymodernweb.org.uk/film/emfilm.htm> [8]). See also R. Finlay, 'The refashioning of Martin Guerre', *American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 553-

71.

28. I. Bremner, 'History without archives: Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*', in Roberts and Taylor, (eds), *The Historian, Television and Television History*, pp.63-75.

Other reviews:

The Observer

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/oct/01/historybooks.robertmccrum> [9]

The New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/04/reviews/010204.04wormalt.html> [10]

The Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/a-history-of-britain-at-the-edge-of-the-world-by-simon-schama-1832822.html> [11]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/296>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2751>

[2] <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/>

[3] <http://www.newtonproject.ic.ac.uk/>

[4] <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/researchEssays.html>

[5] <http://www.spyondproductions.com/parkman/index.htm>

[6] <http://www.historyproducers.com/history2001/>

[7] http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/hob/making_of_01.shtml

[8] <http://www.earlymodernweb.org.uk/film/emfilm.htm>

[9] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/oct/01/historybooks.robertmccrum>

[10] <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/04/reviews/010204.04wormalt.html>

[11] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/a-history-of-britain-at-the-edge-of-the-world-by-simon-schama-1832822.html>