

Call the Next Witness

DEAD CERTAINTIES

(Unwarranted Speculations).

By Simon Schama.

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By R. W. B. Lewis

POETRY," Aristotle declared with his usual forthright dogmatism, "is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history, for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." Historians ever since have sought, periodically, to rebut that claim by investing their particulars with the larger suggestiveness of poetry or storytelling. The effort reached a peak about a century and a half ago, after which time, Simon Schama informs us in this infinitely beguiling book, "history stopped telling stories and aspired to science."

Positivism took over with its belief in the pinning-down of certifiable truths about human affairs. But Mr. Schama — who is a professor of social sciences at Harvard and the author two years ago of "Citizens," a monumental and brilliantly designed narrative of the French Revolution — knows that scientific certainty of that sort is impossible. Facts are too slippery and, partly as a consequence, the historian is always at work selecting, shaping, even poeticizing the materials in question. "Dead Certainties" sets out to explore this whole phenomenon. It proposes to look into "the teasing gap separating a lived event and its subsequent narration."

The author considers two events: the death of Gen. James Wolfe after his victory over the French near Quebec in September 1759, which resulted in the British conquest of Canada; and the murder of Dr. George Parkman at Harvard in November 1849, probably (though not quite definitely) by John White Webster, a professor of chemistry in the Harvard Medical College. In both cases, Mr. Schama's accounts are multiple, with different narrators, varying perspectives, shifting modes of representation and contrasting preconceptions. The result is a mind-teasing delight.

In the case of General Wolfe, we are given two versions of his attack on Montcalm's French forces, first by a fictive but sharply observant English soldier, and then by a historian of Mr. Schama's propensity for narrative who may or may not be Mr. Schama himself. In fact, the 32-year-old Wolfe, struck several times by musket ball, died in a corner of the battlefield, lying near a little bush and attended by only two men. But before we are presented with those facts, we are introduced to the dramatic and richly colorful painting "The Death of General Wolfe," done in London in 1770 by the American Benjamin West. Here Wolfe lies swooning in the arms of three officers and at the center

R. W. B. Lewis's narrative history of the family of William and Henry James, "The Jameses," will be published this summer.



Detail from "The Death of General Wolfe," by Benjamin West (1770).

of a crowded scene, which includes other clustering foreground figures, a meditative, noble-looking Indian and a colonial frontiersman among them. Dimly in the background, ships and men are arrayed in battle.

It is a vast reimagining of the event by West, a way of projecting a moment of far-reaching epic conquest. But West claimed a measure of realistic historical record because all the actors are portrayed in their proper military or frontier costumes. This approach clashed with the stated belief of the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds that people in heroic tableau should always be garbed in Greek or Roman dress to lend them trans-historical or universal significance. In a final twist, West's accurately costumed warriors are, in their postures and gestures, visibly re-enacting a convention in painting, of the descent from the Cross and lamentation over the dead Jesus.

A later version of Wolfe's death was provided by Francis Parkman in "Montcalm and Wolfe" (1884), a magnificent book about which Henry James (one of Mr. Schama's favorite story writers) said to Parkman that "the manner in which you have treated the prodigious theme is worthy of the theme itself." This image of Wolfe simultaneously conveys an image of Parkman himself, crippled by arthritis, rheumatism and failing eyesight. For the power of Parkman's narrative, as Mr. Schama well argues, arose from his intense identification with Wolfe, especially at the end of Wolfe's life and in both men's determination to complete a gigantic mission despite appalling physical ailments. In Parkman's narrative of the dying Wolfe, Mr. Schama writes, "past and present dissolved"; Parkman "became Wolfe and Wolfe lived again through him."

Parkman, meanwhile, is the link between the two episodes Mr. Schama deals with, for it was the historian's uncle, George Parkman, whose grisly murder in Boston just before Thanksgiving in 1849 threw Harvard University and Boston society into extraordinary turmoil. It was "the most painful event in our domestic history," proclaimed Edward Everett, political aspirant and recent president of Harvard. George Parkman, though trained as a physician with a special interest in the management of the insane, busied himself primarily with real estate transactions. He had amassed a huge fortune by the 1840's, and was lordly and obdurate in the collection of rents. John Webster, a professor of some distinction, but beset by money matters and family needs, had borrowed \$483 from Parkman and was laggard in repayment.

On a November afternoon, as it seems, Parkman came storming into Webster's rooms at the Medical College demanding and threatening, until the distraught Webster seized a piece of wood and beat him to death. The crime was not discovered until a week later, when the college janitor, breaking into a "dissecting-room vault" on the premises, uncovered an assortment of bones and body parts and a set of false teeth. That night Webster was arrested.

Upon this melodrama, through the 11-day trial and other developments up to the hanging of John Webster in August 1850, Mr. Schama brings to bear an immense array of narrative elements. After tracing the careers of Parkman and Webster, he presents us with a witness-by-witness report of the trial: actual newspaper comment, much of it attacking the guilty verdict; private letters about the doings by participants and observers; and invented but well-grounded interludes like the jumpy interior thoughts of the janitor and musings by the Governor of Massachusetts in the face of impassioned pleas for clemency.

The Parkman-Webster story is handsomely suited to Mr. Schama's purpose, for like all good mystery stories it was itself an effort at reconstruction, an inquiry into what actually happened. By the author's artful deployment, we confront not only a conflict of evidence (were those false teeth really Dr. Parkman's?) but also a competition of stories, not to say a parade of storytellers, some more and some less gifted and dependable.

TWO narratives discussed by Mr. Schama are of special interest. The first is the 600-page "Report of the Case of John W. Webster," stitched together by the chief prosecutor out of the drafts submitted to him by all the principals in the trial on both sides. It is a great case history, as Mr. Schama says; but it is also something connived at and agreed to in the trial's aftermath.

Then there is the confession purportedly made by Webster a month before his execution, in which the condemned man described the fateful scene and the sudden violent blow. This turns out to be a document written down by a Unitarian minister who had been visiting and attending to Webster in prison. Mr. Schama thinks the statement has "the ring of truth" (as does this reader), but he allows that "the ultimate truth about how George Parkman met his end remains obscure."

This is exactly as it must be and should be, in Mr. Schama's opinion. What he argues for is not so much ultimately undeniable truth but the acceptance of story as a proper vehicle for setting forth historical findings. Noting that the Greek word *historia* originally meant "an inquiry," he remarks that "to have an inquiry, whether into the construction of a legend, or the execution of a crime, is surely to require the telling of stories." He concludes: "And so the asking of questions and the relating of narratives need not, I think, be mutually exclusive forms of historical representation."

Timely words, and winningly expressed. They could have been echoed by Robert Penn Warren (who once said that "historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory"), by John Hersey (who has thought much and written cogently about the complex matter), and by such accomplished narrative historians as C. Vann Woodward, Shelby Foote and Barbara Tuchman. And like the book as a whole, the words may also be usefully mulled over by historians of very different methods and persuasions. □

'We Wander About the Tombs'

While many historians might be frustrated by what Simon Schama describes as "the slipperiness of historical fact," the author of "Dead Certainties" finds the elusive nature of historical research inspiring. "For me, the compelling quality of history lies in the uncertain exploration of the fanciful, as well as of the real past," Mr. Schama said in a telephone interview from his office at Harvard, where he is Mellon Professor of Social Sciences. The conflicting accounts of the deaths of Gen. James Wolfe and George Parkman, he says, provided him with a perfect opportunity to embark on just such an exploration.

While researching an essay for *Granta* magazine on the death of Wolfe, Mr. Schama read Francis Parkman's "Montcalm and Wolfe." He became fascinated by the Parkman family and eventually

stumbled across a wealth of information on the murder of Parkman's uncle, George Parkman. The historical truths were shrouded, but for Mr. Schama, the connections between Parkman's murder and Wolfe's death were irresistible, and the book became "a compulsory thing to do."

Mr. Schama readily admits that "Dead Certainties" — a novelistic account that combines fact and fabrication — is virtually unclassifiable. He refers to it as "a fiction," and says, "essentially, a historian does the same thing that a historical novelist does — we wander about the tombs." Fiction, he says, "is a way to put it all on the table." He adds that he does not want to proclaim that history is fiction, "but pure objectivity is a will-o'-the-wisp; chasing it is insanity."

SUZANNE MACNEILLE

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