

HARVARD

MAGAZINE

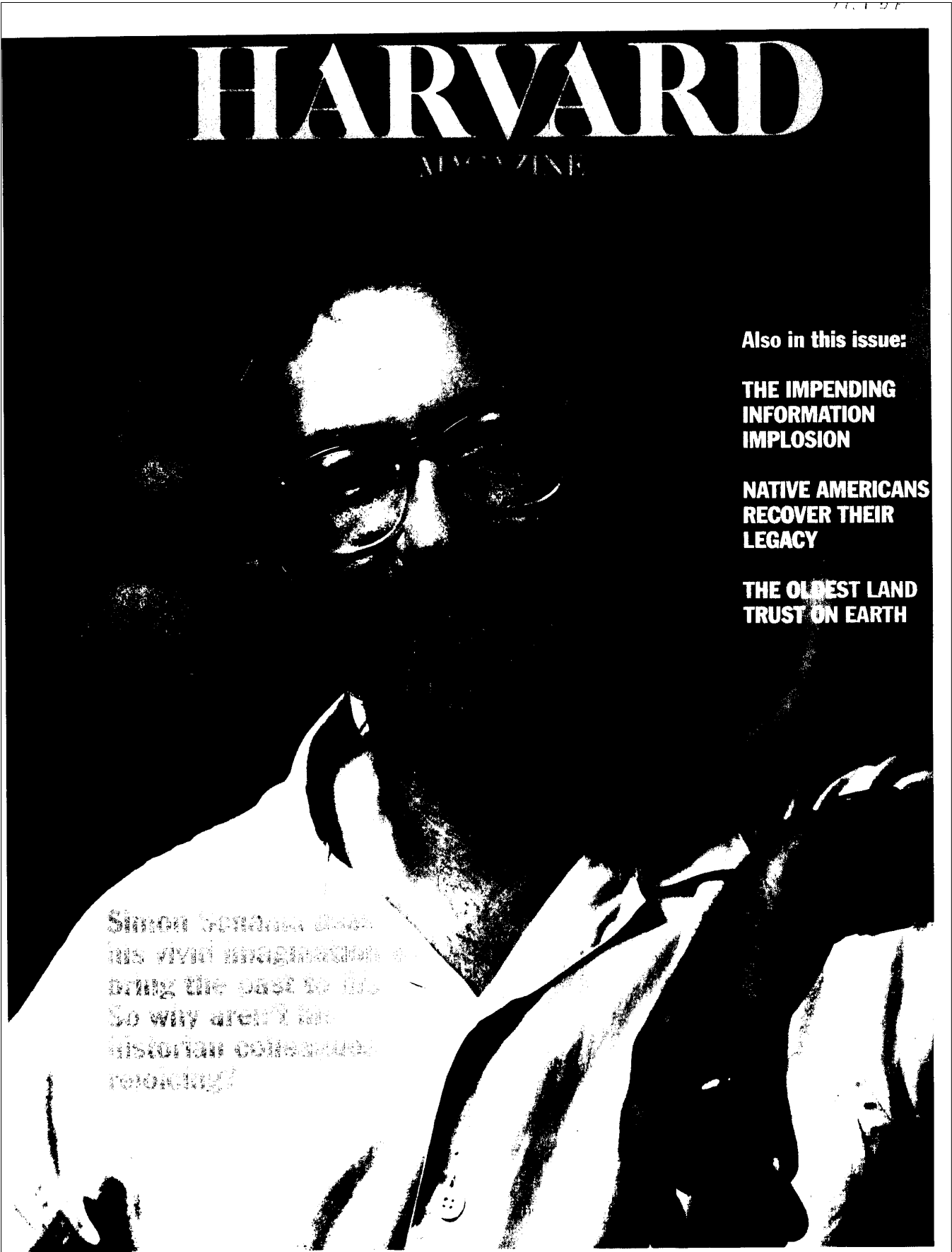
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**THE IMPENDING
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**NATIVE AMERICANS
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**THE OLDEST LAND
TRUST ON EARTH**

Simon Gordon uses his vivid imagination to bring the past to life. So why aren't his historical collections receiving?



A CERTAIN SIMON SCHAMA

*With his unconventional approaches
to the writing of history,
Professor Schama has caught
the imagination of
the reading public—and raised
a few eyebrows in
the historical profession.*

by GLENN KAYE

In the darkened auditorium of the New-York Historical Society, two bright spotlights are trained on Simon Schama.

Schama, the internationally celebrated English-born historian and Mellon professor of the social sciences at Harvard, is all alone on the auditorium's bare stage. Although average in height, he knows how to project his presence throughout the hall. His clothes are strikingly color coordinated. He is wearing a soft blue suit, blue shirt, blue tie, blue socks, and eyeglass frames in a complementary shade of green.

Since taking the stage, Schama has stood in one place, behind a simple oak lectern with a pitcher of water on it. Yet he has remained in constant motion, crossing and uncrossing his ankles, thrusting his hands into his pockets, then bringing them out again for emphasis at decisive moments in his presentation.

The most potent weapon in Schama's dramatic armamentarium, however, is the English language. For the better part of an hour, he has captivated the audience with his eloquence. Whether reading from his script or looking up to address the hall extemporaneously, he is engaging, articulate, loquacious.

Since he is feeling provoked this evening, he is even more fluent than usual. *Dead Certainties*, his fifth book and his first work of historical fiction, has just been published by Knopf. The critical reception has been mixed. While some reviewers have applauded Schama for tackling a genre that is new for him, others have condemned him for flouting the rules and regulations of responsible history.

Now Brown University's Gordon Wood has come out with a highly agitated piece in *The New York Review of Books* alleging that *Dead Certainties* portends the collapse of all standards in the historical profession. Where history requires objective facts, Schama has filled his book with invented details. Where history requires documentary proof, Schama has omitted all footnotes. According to Wood, Schama's refusal to abide by the conventions of historical scholarship has "put the integrity of the discipline of history at risk."

Schama has seized upon this lecture at the historical society as a chance to put forward his own views. When he decided to try his hand at historical fiction, he says, he had no desire to mock the rules that govern the production of history.

Instead, he simply meant to highlight the importance of the imagination in bringing the past to life. When performing the most routine professional tasks—selecting and interpreting evidence, thinking up likely explanations for important events—he must, he says, try to imagine what life was like for his subjects.

Schama makes use of his imaginative faculty, then, every working day. In writing *Dead Certainties*, all he did was give that faculty greater scope. And why not let his imagination dream up characters and dialogue for a change? What harm could there be in his emulating the great historical novelists, if only as a diversion from his more serious scholarly activities?

But Schama, sipping some water, means to go beyond just defending himself; he means to counterattack. Wood has accused him of dishonoring the traditional historical virtues of accuracy and detachment in his novel. Retaliating, Schama contends that those traditional virtues have been rated too highly by the Woods of this world.

"It will not be much of a surprise to you," Schama tells the audience, "to hear that I take an almost entirely opposite view from Wood, that so far from the intellectual integrity of history being policed by the protocols of objectivity, distance, and sci-



Schama, Morgan, and teddy bear, at home.

entific dispassion, its best prospects lie in the forthright admission of subjectivity, immediacy, and literary imagination. History's mission," he continues, "if there be such, is to illuminate the human condition through the witness of memory. And so the truths likely to be yielded by such histories are, in effect, closer to the truths of the great novels and the great poets than the general laws offered by ambitious social scientists."

As those in the auditorium who have followed his career can attest, this hyperarticulate presentation is more than Schama's reply to the critics of *Dead Certainties*. It is his justification for his entire approach to his craft, and a neat (if inadvertent) summary of some of the central paradoxes of his professional life.

Trained as a historian, Schama has spent much of his time exploring the less-bounded fields of literature and art. Renowned as a scholar, he writes his books with an eye to their popular appeal. Often embroiled in historical controversy, he has enjoyed great honors and professional recognition.

Were it not for Schama's multiple achievements, it would be hard to imagine how so many contradictions could remain productively yoked together in one man.

S tack Schama's five books ziggurat-fashion one on top of the other, and the result is a pleasingly abstract composition of rectangular solids in crimson, buckram, green, and black. The books' topics are no less varied than their bindings, for Schama, now 46, has resisted specialization as energetically as some of his colleagues have pursued it. While other historians pride themselves on knowing all there is to know about one trend, one state, or one decade, Schama roams more adventurously through the centuries, settling down with peoples and eras as the historical spirit moves him. Each of his books allowed him to explore a different chapter of the human experience: in *Patriots and Liberators* (1977), the Batavian Republic; in *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel* (1979), the Jewish recolonization of Palestine; in *The Embarrassment of Riches* (1987), the Dutch Golden Age; in *Citizens* (1989), the French Revolution; and in *Dead Certainties* (1991), the North American experiment as distilled in the circumstances of two memorable deaths.

Can anything unify a collection of books that ranges so widely over the past? Has their author been motivated to write

can turn a painting into a star witness from the historical past, an informed emissary giving thorough descriptions of its cultural origins. But he can also unmask a deceptive painting and account for the motives that lie behind its distortions of historical truth.

Schama's visual sense is strongly developed. As a young historian he read art criticism whenever he could, though he lacked formal training in the subject. But it was not until he decided to write about the Dutch Golden Age that he turned his attention to art in a more disciplined way.

The Golden Age seemed to cry out for an art-based approach. *Patriots and Liberators*, Schama's first book on the Netherlands, was a straight political history; it focused on the time in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when French military occupation impeded the Dutch struggle for nationalist and republican self-assertion. The point of going back to study the Netherlands in the seventeenth century was to examine the nature of Dutch identity in its moment of glory. What had held the country together, and what had made it unique, when it was one of Europe's preeminent powers?

Schama found that it was impossible to think about Dutch cultural singularity without exploring "the overwhelming place that the visual had in Dutch life. The amazing availability of graphic prints, the ubiquitousness of graphic political satire . . . —you'd have to make a special effort to overlook all this when writing about the Netherlands," he says.

With the guidance of some friends, Schama put himself through a year-long crash course in "the history of art history." He studied Hegel and the nineteenth-century Viennese criti-

cal tradition, imbibed the teachings of Warburg and Panofsky, and burrowed all the way through to the modern theoretical debates. "I took the tasks I had to take to come back to the Dutch material, I hope quite seriously," he recalls. "I didn't just say that a little bit of art-historical literature from the sixties will do it."

Schama's newfound visual sophistication is apparent in the abundant discussions of works of art that enliven *The Embarrassment of Riches*. Through his interpretations, he calls on paintings from the Golden Age to testify about what he sees as the period's fundamental conflicts or polarities. Of these, the conflict suggested by the book's title—between Christian morality and mundane riches—constitutes Schama's main theme, and the one he most fully elaborates through art-historical examples. But he also uses art to demonstrate the centrality of a number of related oppositions: between domestic cleanliness and domestic filth; sexual restraint and sexual license; childish innocence and childish corruptibility.

Specialists in Dutch civilization were divided over Schama's use of artistic evidence in *The Embarrassment of Riches*. Many were favorably impressed. Jonathan Brown lauded the book as a "model of 'companionate' marriage between art history and social history." And although Jonathan Israel reproved Schama for slighting the role of class conflict in the seventeenth century, he too agreed that "no one can read this book without their capacity to enjoy and appreciate Dutch Golden Age art being immensely enriched and enhanced."

Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, Loeb professor at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, notes, however, that some



Schama with professional accoutrements at the Center for European Studies.

art historians reacted to the book with greater skepticism. In their view, he says, the book fails to do justice to the “sense of tradition” in seventeenth-century Dutch art. “Schama sees the works of art as too much related to the issues of the time,” Begemann explains. “There are levels of complexity—including this question of artistic influence—that he does not want to deal with.”

Schama’s more recent works also betray his fascination with the visual aspects of history, but owing to their topics, they could not have the same art-historical focus as *The Embarrassment of Riches*. As if to compensate, he has chosen to make his next project “a history of landscape sensibility.” It will be, Schama says, a series of essays about different kinds of topography. “It begins with the forest, and there’s a chapter on the river, and there’s a chapter on the great mountain. All of which recover the tradition of symbol, myth, legend, fairy tale, icon, music, political philosophy, under each of these kinds of places.” Probably, but not assuredly, the study will serve as the basis for a set of TV programs produced by the BBC.

Conversing with Schama is the best way to appreciate the hurricane force of his prodigiously verbal mind. Allusions, anecdotes, descriptions, digressions, impressions, and asides come raining down from him in torrents. His words are chosen for their expressive effect. He favors the memorable noun (*carapace, obsession, taboo*), the lively adjective (*outrageous, anarchic, bewildering*), and the emphatic adverb (*alarmingly, unbelievably, absolutely*). An astonishing fluency is his most striking characteristic, and hints at a fundamentally literary personality. How could this not have an impact on his approach to the study of history?

A literary sensibility does color Schama’s work more and more. In his later histories especially, the literary elements are highly prominent, from well-crafted sentences, to novelistic characterizations, to the emphasis he places on the role of rhetoric in shaping the outcome of political struggle. Schama’s literary and imaginative outlook touches not only his writing but also the research that leads up to it. “The archive stuff is never *coldly* empirical,” he says. “It fires the imagination.”

When it goes well, Schama’s library work allows him to peer like a novelist into the consciousness of his subjects. He recalls coming across letters in The Hague’s archives that had been sent by a politician in the Batavian Republic to his wife. Since both sender and recipient had died before the correspondence was opened, Schama and the archivist had to unseal the man’s letters for the first time. “Out fell a lock of his wife’s hair,” he says, “a membership card to the national assembly, the chamber music subscription he never got to hear: bits and pieces of his private life. It was an amazingly private revelation.”

Schama’s literary interests naturally led him to experiment with historical fiction in *Dead Certainties*. The two novellas in this slender volume are based on loosely connected events. In 1759 General Wolfe was killed by musket fire on Quebec’s Plains of Abraham while leading the British charge against the French. In 1849 John Webster, a chemistry professor at Harvard’s medical college, was tried and convicted of murder. His victim, George Parkman, was the uncle of the historian Francis Parkman, who memorialized General Wolfe and the Battle of Quebec in a nineteenth-century historical classic.

Schama was fascinated by the contrast between the battlefield death and the murder. “There are two deaths here,” he

says. “One is public, a kind of death that historical reports compete to celebrate. It’s history used as perpetuation and commemoration. The other,” he continues, “is history used for closure, for oblivion, for forgetting, for packaging; verdicts are pronounced. And maybe the history wasn’t quite so conveniently closed as all that.”

In his previous works, Schama allowed his imagination to range only within the limits of verifiable incidents. Lifting this restriction in *Dead Certainties*, he lets himself make up whole

The real history of Wolfe’s death or Parkman’s murder consists as much of contemporary misapprehensions as it does of bare, sifted truths.

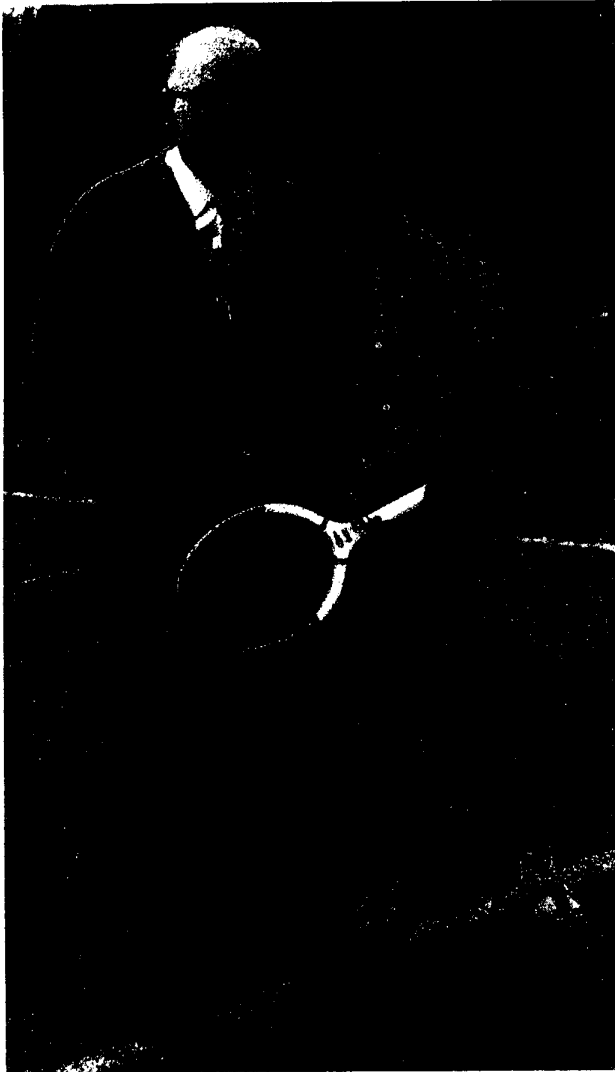
scenes, playing with all the techniques at a fiction writer’s disposal. He was inspired to try his hand at the novella form in part by such modern historical novelists as E. L. Doctorow, Timothy Mo, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. So long as he called what he wrote fiction, not history, he couldn’t see any reason to deprive himself of the creative license they were enjoying.

But it was more than just a matter of patterning himself after authors who had long delighted him. Schama had come around to feeling that literature offered the most satisfying renditions of “historicity,” of the specific quality or sense of historical action. Like Doctorow and Marquez, he wanted to use historical fiction to “deal with issues of our relationship with [earlier] generations, with issues of memory, with this strange, poetic *frisson* that where we go, others have gone before.”

The formal devices of *Dead Certainties* permit Schama to develop these themes in artfully indirect ways. Flawed narrators, interior monologues, and differing points of view break up the record of the battle and the trial. The book suggests that it is impossible to put historical events entirely back together once they have been shattered into uncertainties by unreliable witnesses and interested interpreters.

But it also suggests that completely accurate depictions of events would not necessarily be the most authentic ones; that the real history of Wolfe’s death or Parkman’s murder consists as much of contemporary misapprehensions and misunderstandings as it does of the bare, sifted truths that historians can isolate in their studies. “I would not have shaped it as a fiction—would not have invented any passages at all—if this book were actually about offering the truest possible account,” Schama says. “It isn’t. It’s offering accounts that range from the most imagined to the most baldly presented evidence.”

Many reviewers have praised Schama’s willingness to take his pursuit of history’s ghosts into the fictional realm. Others, Gordon Wood among them, have been able to see nothing in *Dead Certainties* save the author advertising his disdain for historical objectivity. But Schama insists that he has the highest respect for objective truth. “I do believe probably it’s a mistake to search for pure objectivity. I don’t think that makes me in some sense a pure relativist. Again, I don’t know why [Wood] should have thought I thought that one cannot compare or con-



Simon, age eleven or twelve, with his father, Arthur.

trast plausibility, coherence, apparent closeness or distance from the truth. With respect to all of which, I have a completely conventional view.”

Schama explains that *Dead Certainties* “is about, as they say in corporate literature, *downsizing* the magnitude of certainty—to eliminate this ghastly phrase—the *definitive* version.” In some ways his most challenging book, it is also the one that displays his literary gifts to their best advantage, by showing how perfectly they complement his deepest historical convictions.

Simon Michael Schama was born in London on February 13, 1945. His father’s ancestors had been spice traders in Turkey and Izmir, his mother’s, timber farmers in Lithuania; so his ethnic roots ramified out to the farthest reaches of the Jewish world. But both his parents were English-born, and his childhood memories owe as much to the English setting as they do to the reverberations of an immigrant past.

Schama’s father was a textile merchant of highly variable fortunes. Cars and houses were always coming and going, which

made the family a little insecure. But Schama can remember no sense of panic; they never lacked for food and clothes. During one prosperous stretch, they moved to a suburb on the Thames estuary, but by the time Schama was nine they were back in London. “So I spent my childhood on the beach and my adolescence on the tops of buses,” he says.

The Schamas often “did terribly English things, like boating on the river—like something out of *Wind in the Willows* or *Three Men in a Boat*.” They attended cricket games and visited Tudor mansions, including Hatfield House, “where Elizabeth I heard the news that she was going to be queen.”

Even as Schama’s father toiled in the *schmata* business, he found time to indulge his passion for the theater. He took his son to the Old Vic and, in the forties and fifties, often volunteered his talents as an impresario, organizing fundraising theatricals for Jewish philanthropies. He produced Shakespeare,

“My father said: ‘You know why I have done this? Because the spoken word is the Jews’ weapon.’ ”

popular plays, and variety shows. “He was brilliant at doing that,” Schama says. “He completely missed his life’s calling.”

There was a serious side to his father’s showmanship. “When I was very small, my father got me to learn (I can still recite it for you) *Henry V*’s ‘Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more . . .’—the speech during the battle of Harfleur,” Schama says. “Which I performed in front of my school, to the intense embarrassment of my mother, when I was about seven. My father said: ‘You know why I have done this? Because the spoken word is the Jews’ weapon. We can’t really be soldiers; we must always rely on the spoken word.’ ”

In one legendary episode, Schama’s father was part of a group that challenged some of Oswald Mosley’s Black Shirts as they paraded through the East End. The confrontation might have turned ugly, but Arthur Schama simply outbattered the Fascist band, and they retreated from the neighborhood without violent incident. “So my father had this sense that rhetoric and oratory and the literary imagination—especially spoken, but written too—was a source of power and integrity,” Schama says.

Along with an appreciation for the language, Schama acquired in childhood his feeling for history. “It was very hard in the fifties and sixties to grow up in England without any sense of historical culture. Those little expeditions to country houses or to Runnymede field were important, but I think you couldn’t avoid it. It’s something that’s hard to describe even for English children now, certainly for American children.”

When Schama went up to Cambridge, he had already chosen history as his major field. But his parents were keen on his becoming a lawyer, and he meant to accommodate them by reading history only for his first tripos exam (administered after two years of college); he intended to study law for his second exam (administered at the close of the third and final year).

But these legal ambitions didn’t last long. When Schama disclosed to his history professors his plan to switch over to law, he

recalls, "they looked a bit *stricken* and said, 'Well, pick up a law book.'" He examined a hefty red tome entitled *Winfield on Torts*. "It was the opposite of an epiphany," he says. "It was a negative epiphany. It was so arcane and dull it was like reading a maintenance manual for how to look after combine harvesters. I was absolutely cured. It was a great relief to feel I was cured, and to go on doing history."

One of Schama's victorious history professors was Sir John Plumb, who had been taken with Schama from the moment he arrived in Cambridge. As a student Schama "was very much as he is now, ebullient, creative, torrential," Plumb recalls. "He was a person of extravagantly obvious gifts. He had a high intelligence, a natural ability with words, and a very warm, compassionate nature, and so was naturally drawn to the human problems of history."

For his part, Schama was gratified to discover a kindred spirit in Plumb. Unlike his Cambridge colleague Sir Geoffrey Elton, archdefender of archival objectivity, Plumb concerned himself with developing a narrative style that could convey the excitement of history to a popular audience. Schama thought Plumb did archival work as impressive as Elton's, but he admired Plumb for reveling, as Elton did not, in the "flair" of historical literature. Exposure to Plumb encouraged Schama to pursue the kind of historical projects that were naturally the most congenial to him.

When Schama sat for his first tripos exam in history—a rigorous battery of six papers covering everything from the Long Parliament to the New Deal—everyone confidently expected him to turn in a brilliant performance. The results were soon announced; the examining committee had awarded him only upper-second-class honors. Schama was devastated, but Plumb

"The outstanding person in the college was about to be destroyed before our eyes," Plumb remembers. The professor consoled his young protégé and offered this advice: "Don't be upset, be angry."

was furious. "The outstanding person in the college was about to be destroyed before our eyes," Plumb remembers.

So the professor drove out to Schama's parents' apartment the next morning to console his young protégé and to offer this advice: "Don't be upset, be angry." Back in Cambridge, he petitioned to have Schama's grade reconsidered. University officials adamantly refused to allow any rereading of the papers, however, and the middling grade remained on Schama's record.

According to Plumb, it has only been with the recent opening of the archives of the late Sir Herbert Butterfield, former Regius professor of history, that a plausible explanation for this episode has come to light. It seems that Butterfield, a Christian, secretly devoted his energies to undermining the reputation of Plumb, a secularist, in the academic world. A disciple of Butterfield's had infiltrated the examining committee, Plumb

says, and from there carried on his mentor's crusade. By giving low marks to the three papers he evaluated, he was able to prevent the committee from conferring on Schama the high honors its other members thought he deserved.

The affair was a setback, but a minor one. The following year, Schama received a "starred first" on his second tripos exam, an exceptional event that helped convince his college to offer him a teaching fellowship immediately upon his graduation. At the age of 21, Schama was well launched upon his professorial career.

Walking to his office in Adolphus Busch Hall—home of Harvard's Center for European Studies—Schama passes a replica of the twelfth-century Brunswick Lion. In the eleven years since he joined the Harvard faculty, Schama has become a no less imposing fixture on campus than this larger-than-life bronze. Among his students and colleagues, he has established a reputation for versatility and readiness to experiment with new techniques of historical instruction and research.

Certainly Schama has been an innovator in the classroom. As his scholarly interests have evolved, he has designed and offered a profusion of new courses, including "Pieter Bruegel and Northern Humanism," "Art and Politics in Europe, 1800-1871," "Art and Allegiance in the Baroque," and "Reading and Writing Narrative History." But he hardly considers these additions to the curriculum to be enough; he continuously looks for new ways of presenting his material, for fresh methods of capturing his students' attention.

Midway through the art and politics course some years ago, Schama brought in a bottle of red wine. It was a prize, he declared, for the first member of the class who could identify the passage he was about to read aloud. When he had finished his recitation, one student correctly recognized the piece as having been drawn from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The student claimed the wine, and the rest of the class was painlessly drawn into a discussion of the Romantic Movement's penchant for the macabre.

In his graduate seminars, the stagecraft can be more subdued. Schama "doesn't suffer fools gladly," observes Benjamin Kaplan, who studied at Harvard in the eighties and is now teaching at Brandeis. "He is the kind of teacher who asks his students to reach for the highest level. Otherwise he chides, he teases, he frowns, he tells you to go do your homework."

The other professors in Harvard's history department have found much that is worthy of esteem in their British-born colleague. "Simon's superbright," Patrice Higonnet says. "He has a terrific memory; he's completely on top of the discipline; he's *un phénomène*." Charles Maier agrees. "I'm a great admirer," he says. "I wish I had his gifts."

Maier respects Schama's ability to imbue his works with popular appeal through his storytelling and his "sense of the pictorial." But he emphasizes that, to achieve the status of genuine classics within the historical profession, Schama's books will have to weather a demanding scrutiny over the next ten or twenty years. "We ask different questions of professional history," Maier explains. "One of these is narrative value; the other is a contribution to the ongoing project of adding to the store of knowledge and to the useful interpretations of that knowledge. Schama," says Maier, "should be appraised along both dimensions."

An unlucky incident befell Schama while he was writing *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel*, his account of the Rothschild family's sponsorship of Jewish agricultural settlements in Palestine. With the permission of Lord Victor Rothschild, who had asked him to undertake the study, Schama had had all the archives relating to the settlements moved from a lawyer's office in Haifa to a new building at Christ's College, Cambridge. One morning at four o'clock he was awakened by the college porter.

"Er, sir, there's something happening to your boxes," the porter said.

"What kind of something," asked Schama, still groggy with sleep.

"Well, sir, it's water."

Schama shot out of bed and ran to the storeroom, where he discovered that the building's central heating pipes had exploded. The archives were submerged in two feet of steaming water. "It was like the last hours of the *Titanic*, only at boiling point. I couldn't believe it. I thought, Victor Rothschild will have me executed! More importantly, I saw this entire history drowning. It was *horrifying!*"

Graduate students were hurriedly roused from their beds. Joining Schama in a human chain, they waded in and bailed out all the boxes. A bookbinder from Grantchester arrived in a car, stretched washing lines across the college theater, and

"Er, sir, there's something happening to your boxes," the porter said.

hung the soggy documents out to dry. In the end only a few boxes out of several hundred suffered irreparable damage. But the episode was symbolic of the troubles Schama encountered in writing *Two Rothschilds*, and more generally in bringing his historical perspective directly to bear on Jewish questions.

Schama can recall being an orthodox little boy. At the age of five or six, he learned Hebrew and pored over a *Classics Illustrated Bible*. Soon he was reading the real Bible, enjoying the bloody battle scenes of Kings and Chronicles rather more than the sacred revelations of Genesis and Exodus.

As his education progressed, however, his religious convictions subsided. A high-school class on the Enlightenment, taught by a Voltaire look-alike, impressed Schama no end: "I remember sitting there thinking, it's quite extraordinary, that it's not only being taught *about* Voltaire, but *by* Voltaire." It was as if the great *philosophe* himself had descended from the heavens to rescue Schama for the European tradition of rational thought.

In the mid-seventies, while lecturing at Cambridge, Schama felt ready to see whether he could cultivate a more active interest in Jewish history than he had previously sustained. He and the translator Nicholas De Lange convened an informal seminar that met over supper to talk about the history and historiography of the post-Biblical Jewish experience. It was owing to his involvement with this seminar that he was invited to write *Two Rothschilds*.

The project triggered ambivalent feelings in Schama. He was fascinated by the diaries of the pioneering Jewish settlers

in Palestine, "people ripped out of Lodz or Lvov or somewhere, and simply, in the sense of both exhilaration and utter bewilderment and sometimes desperation, figuring out what sort of Jews they were supposed to be, in this absolutely alien world." He enjoyed reconstructing the milieu they inhabited, with its Polish rabbis, Turkish officials, and French agricultural engineers.

But the archives Schama was examining showed that the Rothschild-funded settlements did not escape for very long the region's political struggles. If the settlers first thought mainly of sinking wells and planting orange trees, they soon found themselves taking up arms in the conflict with the Arabs. "As the scenario progressed toward the problematic quality of Zionism as we still have it," Schama recalls, "the more *confined* and *claustrophobic* I became."

Two Rothschilds subtly reflects these anxieties. It is Schama's least adventurous book, the one in which he cleaves most closely to the documentary record. Oppressed by his sense of "the impending tragedies of Israel/Palestine," he could not force his prose to soar.

According to Plumb, Schama never returned to Jewish subjects because "his imagination does not take fire on the problems of Jewish history. He wants to do something larger." But another interpretation of Schama's later career is that he has indeed continued to explore Jewish themes, only not in the head-on fashion of *Two Rothschilds*. Schama's friend John Brewer believes that "you can read *The Embarrassment of Riches* with the Dutch as a kind of Israel."

Keith Baker of Stanford makes a similar point about *Citizens*, the history of the French Revolution that Schama completed in time for the bicentennial commemorations of 1989. Many professional historians were shocked, Baker says, to discover an unforgiving indictment of the Revolution emerge from the book's disarmingly entertaining narrative. What most offended them was Schama's thesis that the Revolution had always depended on bloodshed to gain adherents and silence dissent. "For Schama, you're not talking about a good revolution in 1789 that deteriorated into a bad revolution in the Terror," Baker explains. "His argument is that the Revolution is violent, uncontrollable, vicious, from the very beginning."

Baker suggests that the history of the present century colors Schama's appraisal of the Revolution: "It's interesting that the model he uses for the Revolution is the Holocaust, although he never makes this explicit. What is it that links together the images of cruelty Schama seems to have set down more and more frantically as his book proceeds? The implied reference to the Holocaust, and the idea that once you start dehumanizing your enemies, you are destined to destroy them."

Schama readily concedes that his books bear the impress of our era: "Historians who believe that they're not carrying the baggage of their own time are sort of deluding themselves. I don't want to kid myself about that."

Nor does he want to kid himself about the cosmic importance of his work. Despite his phenomenal productivity in recent years, he insists that his is not a life overwhelmingly devoted to intellectual pursuits. "There are lots of times I really like doing nothing at all," he says. "I sit here looking at the trees, or reading poetry . . . I love going to Fenway Park from time to time, even when Clemens is losing. So, what can I tell you?"

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