

Novel History

Dead Certainties
(Unwarranted Speculations)

By Simon Schama.
Knopf, 333 pp., \$21.00

Gordon S. Wood

It was bound to happen. Sooner or later a distinguished historian had to cross over, had to mingle the writing of fiction with the writing of history. The circumstances were ripe, the pressures were enormous. Everyone else was doing it. Novelists had long been blending fact with fiction without apology. They not only set their invented characters among real historical figures, but they had these authentic historical figures do and say things they had never done. When E.L. Doctorow was asked whether Emma Goldman and Evelyn Nesbit had ever actually met as they did in his novel *Ragtime*, he replied, "They have now." Journalists and TV writers have been doing it, creating hybrids called "faction" and "docu-drama." Television even began simulating the news, adding made-up pictures to otherwise apparently lifeless words.

These examples, however important, are merely the manifestations of a larger, more significant force at work. The blurring of fact and fiction is part of the intellectual climate of our postmodern time—dominated as it is by winds of epistemological skepticism and Nietzschean denials of the possibility of objectivity that are sweeping through every humanistic discipline, sometimes with cyclonic ferocity. Historians are usually the last to know about current fashions, but so powerful have the postmodern, deconstruction theories become that even historians can no longer remain ignorant of them.

Most historians are not yet ready to admit that they simply make up the past as a fiction writer does or to deny outright the possibility of representing a past reality, but the signs of doubt and anxiety are in the air. Hayden White and the journal *History and Theory* have of course long been writing about the fictional character of historical narrative and urging historians to recognize the complex nature of what they do. Peter Novick in a recent important and widely acclaimed book, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988), has offered his fellow historians an elegiac and anguished account of the demise of the founding ideals of the discipline of history with little or no hope for their rebirth. Literary scholars have been very busy bringing their postmodern, deconstructionist theories onto the historian's turf and calling themselves "new historicists" while further undermining the old-time faith in an objective past reality. Although historians have scarcely begun to experience the kinds of epistemological quarrels that have torn apart the literary disciplines over the past decade or so, the signs of change are ominous. And Simon Schama's new book, *Dead Certainties*, is the most portentous of them.

Dead Certainties, which loosely combines two separate stories about the past—one about the death of General Wolfe at the battle of Quebec in 1759 and the other about the murder of George Parkman by Professor John

Webster of Harvard in 1849—is a self-proclaimed experiment in narration. In his storytelling Schama has avoided neat chronological sequences and has in fact "deliberately dislocated the conventions by which histories establish coherence and persuasiveness." Both stories "begin with abrupt interventions...and end with accounts at odds with each other as to what has happened." He has given us what literary scholars would call interior monologues, shifting voices, and multiple points of view; and if these were not enough he has even invented whole passages, including a fictional account by one of Wolfe's soldiers of the battle of Quebec and a made-up dialogue between two of the figures in the Webster trial. It is an extraordinary book, with important implications for the



Detail from *The Death of Wolfe* by Benjamin West, 1770

discipline of history, especially because of who Schama is.

Schama is no small-time renegade in the historical profession. He is not a philosophically inclined critic of history, like Hayden White, who carps at the margins of the discipline and preaches skepticism and subversion to the halfway converted but writes no history. Schama is a prominent practicing historian. Indeed, at the outset of his career he was marked by his mentor J.H. Plumb as "the outstanding historian of his generation." Whether or not he is that, he has certainly risen rapidly to the top of the historical profession.

He was born in London in 1945 ("the night we bombed Dresden"), he says, educated at Cambridge University, and taught at Cambridge and Oxford until moving a decade or so ago across the Atlantic to Harvard, where he is currently Mellon Professor in the Social Sciences and senior associate at the Center for European Studies.

Though only in his mid-forties Schama has already published (before *Dead Certainties*) four highly acclaimed history books, the two most recent of which sold widely in several nations and languages. Not only have these books brought him professional

acclaim, but they have made him something of an international celebrity. Earlier this year the London *Sunday Times Magazine* devoted its weekly feature "A Life in the Day" to this university professor—a bit of fame usually reserved for politicians and film stars. Even in Boston local television stations have occasionally invited Schama to comment on current events, including the upheavals in Eastern Europe, about which he presumably knows not much more than the rest of us.

So that when a professional historian of Schama's status and significance deliberately decides to mingle fact with fiction and try an experiment in narration, the result can be no trivial matter. In writing this book, however, Schama seems to have no hidden

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published in 1977, began, he admits, "as a trim monograph" but "came to assume proportions of...indecent corpulence," 745 pages worth—a problem of volubility Schama has continued to struggle with. Telling the story of the complicated process that destroyed the Dutch Republic and established the Kingdom of the United Netherlands under William I required Schama's mastering the Dutch language and the Dutch archives, and that alone was an awe-inspiring achievement.

Most reviewers believed that there was nothing to rival Schama's study of this important period of Dutch history—in any language. Still, even in this very scholarly work dealing with a relatively recondite subject for an English-speaking historian, Schama nevertheless expressed an aspiration to break out of the "pedantic specializations" of the historical profession. "It is time, perhaps," he wrote in his preface to the book, "to poke our heads above our several molehills and to take in a view, however nervous and blinking, of the broader historical landscape." He knew too from his teacher J.H. Plumb that "history must at least strive to be art before it can pretend to be a science." Already this early book revealed the richness and garrulousness of his narrative style, where words and sentences seem to spill out as fast as the storyteller can speak. One reviewer said that Schama's writing sometimes "approaches the ripeness of late eighteenth century prose, but it never goes beyond the bounds of decency."

His second book, *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel* (1978), dealing with the contribution of Edmund and James de Rothschild to the creation of a Jewish community in Palestine, was an even more traditional history than his first book, based as it essentially was on the single archive of the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association. The book grew out of an informal seminar on Jewish social and intellectual history that Schama had been teaching to undergraduates at Cambridge University in the 1960s and 1970s. It was a very personal story, which at one point in his life he felt he had to tell, but one he says he would never have finished except for the "goadings of those two kindly but purposeful bullies, my mother and father," especially his father who was "a passionate enthusiast of Jewish history."

His move from England to Harvard in the late 1970s allowed fuller scope for Schama's deep desire and remarkable ability to tell stories, an activity that in origin is after all an oral process. At Harvard, unlike Oxford or Cambridge, he became, as he says, the examiner of his own curriculum and thus became free to develop his lecture courses at will. "I do anything I want to," he says. By his own count his courses now number twenty or so, ranging in subject from baroque art and architecture and eighteenth-century French politics and painting to Dutch art and Pieter Brueghel, and most recently to the reading and writing of narrative history, which, he says, has become "a major concern" of his. This *Dead Certainties* bears out. Nearly all of Schama's courses combine art with history and so rely heavily on the showing of slides. He says he never has a prepared text for his lectures, only his slides, "just a series of

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shuffled images." His very popular lectures at Harvard thus become awesome feats of extemporaneous speaking, extraordinary displays of the ancient art of oral storytelling with the modern addition of pictures.

His third book, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (1987), revealed fully Schama's remarkable talent for telling stories and shuffling images, and it brought him to the attention of a wider public. Like his first book, *Embarrassment of Riches* was huge—698 pages—but it was not old-fashioned linear narrative history; as Schama admitted, it "strayed a good deal from the straight and narrow of the historical method." The book was essentially a cornucopia of stories, dozens if not hundreds of them, with over three hundred interspersed illustrations. Schama roamed all over seventeenth-century Dutch society,



John Webster

gathering what he called "bits and pieces of culture," incidents and anecdotes, curiosities and delights, paintings and engravings, on a wide variety of subjects, from criminal punishments to dike building, from Calvinist patriotism to beached whales, from Dutch eating, drinking, and smoking habits to tulip sales, from cleanliness to child-rearing—all designed to reveal a collective self-portrait of the Dutch people. The "shameless eclecticism" of the study was very controversial, one critic calling the book the "triumph of ingenuity over evidence." Some experts in Dutch history or art history were reluctant to praise this eccentric and imaginative book, but many others did. Still, Schama himself expressed concern that the collective image of the seventeenth-century Dutch people that he had tried to recover "might at best be fugitive and ghostly."

His next book, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (1989), carried Schama even closer to pure storytelling. "*Citizens* came tumbling out of me—it poured out," he says; "I was even writing it in the shower!" The book, which is 948 pages long, has no pretensions to being scientific or dispassionate. Unlike *Embarrassment of Riches*, which retained conventional documentation, *Citizens* has no reference notes. Although the book was "in no sense fiction (for there is no deliberate invention)," Schama realized that "it may well strike the reader as story rather than history." It represented "a

deliberate turning away from analytical history" and an unabashed revival of an old-fashioned nineteenth-century narrative "with a beginning, middle, and end that tries to resonate with its protagonists' own overdeveloped sense of past, present and posterity."

Schama rejected the objectivity that historical distance presumably confers and opted for the proximity of the historical participants. Like a novelist, he concentrated not on society and impersonal historical forces but on the contingent thoughts and actions of particular individuals—allowing what they said and did "to shape the flow of the story... year after year, month after month." Consequently, he comes close to viewing the past reality of at least the period of the French Revolution as simply a story waiting to be told. "It is not in the least fortuitous," he says, "that the creation of the modern political world coincided precisely with the birth of the modern novel." His rejection of the "conventional barriers" of history writing is clear: he had learned that "to write history without the play of imagination is to dig in an intellectual graveyard, so that in *Citizens* I have tried to bring a world to life rather than entomb it in erudite discourse."

Thus Schama's rendezvous with fictional history in *Dead Certainties* was ordained almost from the beginning. He begins his first story, entitled "The Many Deaths of General Wolfe," with a six-page monologue by an imaginary soldier involved in Wolfe's scaling of the cliffs of Quebec, which resulted in Wolfe's death and the British victory over the French in Canada. With this device Schama certainly captures the tone and language of an eighteenth-century character. But his invented soldier's account, though it contains nothing that is untrue, ultimately lacks verisimilitude: no ordinary soldier in the ranks could have heard about or experienced all that he describes about the battle of Quebec. Which is why Stendhal's description in the opening chapters of *The Charterhouse of Parma* of Fabrizio's bewildering experience in the battle of Waterloo is so wonderfully effective: it undercuts the view, which is the basic premise of Schama's book, that participants have a privileged access to knowledge of the events they are involved in. The opposite is in fact true: it is the historian removed from the events who is in a better position to put together the confused, disparate, and sometimes contradictory accounts by the participants into a plausible whole. This problem runs through Schama's entire experiment in fictionalized history.

Schama next shifts to a brilliantly concise twelve-page "Life of General Wolfe" written from Wolfe's point of view; sometimes in fact the account enters directly into Wolfe's mind. Then in the second chapter Schama jumps to the opening of the exhibition of Benjamin West's great painting *The Death of General Wolfe* at the Royal Academy on April 29, 1771. This is followed by an incisive essay on West and the significance of his decision to paint Wolfe in contemporary dress. West's deliberate deviation from the conventions of history painting was not done, however, for the sake of realism but, as Schama is at pains to point out, for the sake of rhetorical effect. Indeed, the effect was so great that for future generations of British children

drilled in the pieties of imperial history, it was West's scene they imagined rather than any more literal account.... After West, nothing could dispel the odour of sanctity that lay over Wolfe's memory.... What more could possibly be said?

With this question hanging in the air Schama then dramatically takes the reader to the Massachusetts Historical Society on November 21, 1893, on the occasion of a memorial tribute to the great historian Francis Parkman, who had recently died. Next, Schama moves back in time into Parkman's house and mind in 1880, concluding the chapter with a brief summary of Parkman's life, which concentrates on his pain in both body and soul as he struggled to write his multivolume masterpiece, *France and England in North America*, whose climax is the battle of Quebec. In the end, says



George Parkman

Schama, Parkman wrote of the neurotic and disease-ridden Wolfe on the eve of the battle as if he were Wolfe himself. "Past and present dissolved at this moment. He became Wolfe and Wolfe lived again through him."

Schama then resumes the imagined first-person account of the battle of Quebec by the anonymous soldier, which had begun the story. The soldier recounts the rather sordid and inconspicuous gurgling and groaning death of Wolfe, whose "face had gone stiff and greenish" with blood from his wounded belly "oozing through his shirt and coat." Schama's story ends with a poignant letter (presumably authentic) written a month after the battle by Wolfe's betrothed, Katherine Lowther, to Wolfe's mother, who had disapproved of the match, begging to have any messages or marks of endearment Wolfe might have left sent to her.

This story, "The Many Deaths of General Wolfe," takes up less than a quarter of Schama's book; the remainder is devoted to the "Death of a Harvard Man," which has no relation to the first story, except that the murdered man, George Parkman, was Francis Parkman's uncle. For Schama this is enough: "the Parkman inheritance...." he says, "deeply colours both stories."

This story opens cinematically in 1850 with Governor George Briggs of Massachusetts pondering the possibility of commuting the execution of John Webster, a Harvard professor of chem-

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istry, who had been found guilty of murdering George Parkman after Parkman had demanded that he pay back a loan of \$483. Schama has the governor shuffling through the piles of letters arriving at his desk from all over the country, letters that both affirmed and denied Webster's guilt. "Yes, yes, folly and lies, fairy tales and fables," he has the governor think to himself.

But where lay the truth, the real history of George Parkman and John White Webster? Much as he respected the stern proceedings of the trial, he was too much of a lawyer himself (or perhaps too much of a smithy's son) to imagine that it told the whole story. [Webster's] defence, after all, had opened with one account and closed with another—a fatal strategy: even the prisoner's own confession could not wholly be credited. Indeed, confessions were two a penny....

From this beginning, characteristic of Schama's novelistic technique throughout, he proceeds to tell the whole fascinating and macabre story. George Parkman disappears one afternoon just before Thanksgiving in 1849. A week later pieces of a body are discovered at Harvard Medical College. The corpse is identified from barely recognizable false teeth by the dentist who swears he made them. Professor John Webster of Harvard is arrested and tried for the brutal murder. It is a story so sensational that a century and a half later it still makes present-day Boston murder cases seem tame by comparison.

Using the same novelistic devices he used in the first story—interior monologues, shifts from one mind and point of view to another, and straight third-person narratives interspersed with the printing of presumably authentic documents—Schama develops his exciting tale with great skill. He introduces us to the principal characters and develops them fully and imaginatively as a sensitive novelist would: the victim, George Parkman, eccentric real-estate speculator and landlord whose early desire to establish a modern and humane insane asylum in Boston had been thwarted; the accused, John Webster, whose income was insufficient to support the style of life of a Harvard professor and who had therefore been compelled to borrow money from Parkman; Ephraim Littlefield, janitor at the Medical College, who was suspicious of Webster and discovered the cut-up remains of Parkman in the basement of Webster's laboratory; the prosecuting attorneys, especially George Bemis, who kept a diary; the defense attorneys, who could never quite agree on a consistent defense for Webster; the marshal who arrested Webster; the chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, Lemuel Shaw, whose mountainous presence overawed all courtrooms; and a host of lesser figures who fade in and out of the narrative. It is a tour de force of storytelling, but is it history?

Schama concedes in the end that it is not. "Though these stories may at times appear to observe the discursive conventions of history," he writes, "they are in fact historical novellas." Nevertheless, despite this disavowal,

Schama seems to believe that he is doing something more than writing historical fiction like Sir Walter Scott or Kenneth Roberts. It is not clear, however, just what his experiment in narration is designed to accomplish.

No doubt Schama believes that his new novelistic techniques and his deliberate violation of the conventions of history writing allow him to tell a better, more convincing story. But is it a better and more convincing story than a novelist could write? And if not, then why the experiment? Schama cannot have it both ways. He cannot write fiction and still assume that it will have the authenticity and credibility of history. His problem in mingling fiction with fact in history writing is similar to that of mixing simulations with authentic documentary material in television news. The readers or viewers are never sure which is which, and therefore come to doubt the truthfulness of the whole. One reads *Dead Certainties* with admiration and credulity until suddenly something in the narrative provokes the question of whether or not there is documentary evidence for it. Maybe Schama actually has a diary or a letter he could point to that would clinch his point, but in his fictionalized account there are no references, no conventional proof, and the purely invented parts taint the credibility of the whole. In retrospect, even Schama himself seems to have some doubts. "I have a slight pang that I did invent anything at all," he told an interviewer. "I could see a genuine nonfiction book that would have a lot of immediacy without narrative invention."

The loss of credibility far outweighs any aesthetic gains that Schama might have gotten from his narrative experiment. Indeed, his violation of the conventions of history writing actually puts the integrity of the discipline of history at risk. Those conventions of history writing, like any conventions, are fragile and always vulnerable to challenge; they are scarcely more than a century old. Of course, there is no inherent reason why these conventions of objectivity and documentary proof should continue to guide and control the writing of history; they certainly did not control much of the history writing in the distant past and still do not control what passes for history in other cultures. But they have been painstakingly developed in the Western world and have respectable justifications for their existence; they ought not to be abandoned without a fight either to postmodern skepticism or to Schama's playful experiments in narration.

In an eight-page "Afterword" Schama attempts to explain why he tried his experiment in narration. Although he is far from a postmodern deconstructionist and does not "scorn the boundary between fact and fiction," he does seem to share some of the epistemological angst that is so prevalent these days. Events did actually happen, he has admitted on another occasion, but they "can't be very clearly determined even with the resources we have available." Since historians can never truly enter into a past world, they "are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness, however thorough or revealing their

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documentation." We are unavoidably remote from our subjects, he says, and therefore "we are doomed to be forever hailing someone who has just gone around the corner and out of earshot."

In both of the cases he has dealt with in his book, "alternative accounts of the event compete for credibility, both for contemporaries and for posterity." Thus both of his imaginative stories, he explains,

end with accounts at odds with each other as to what has happened, as to the significance of the deaths and the character of the protagonists. . . . Both dissolve the certainties of events into the multiple possibilities of alternative narrations. . . . Thus, General Wolfe dies many deaths, and though a verdict is rendered and a confession delivered in the case of John Webster, the ultimate truth about how George Parkman met his end remains obscure. . . . These are stories, then, of broken bodies, uncertain ends, indeterminate consequences. . . flickering glimpses of dead worlds.

All this seems a bit overdrawn and overwrought—as does much of the epistemological doubt currently being expressed by scholars. We know a good deal more about these events than Schama implies; he is certainly not the first historian to write about them. We know about the difference between Wolfe's actual death and West's rhetorical portrayal, and we know, too, where Parkman has been superseded by new research. And we have more than a shadowy sense that John Webster killed George Parkman. We know in fact more about these events than any of the participants could or did, which may suggest that Schama has got it backward: that it is the participants in the events who chase shadows and the historians who have a more comprehensive grasp of past reality. Of course, as Schama says, there are multiple points of view and alternative ways of recounting these events. But it is no good for the historian to bring his hands and simply lay out, as Schama says he has done in this book, "all the accidents and contingencies that go into the making of an historical narrative." It is the historian's responsibility to analyze and evaluate all these different views and narrations and then arrive at as full and as objective an explanation and narration of the events as possible.

Still, the question remains: What did Schama hope to accomplish with this experiment in narration? Did he want seriously to affect the writing of narrative history, or simply fulfill a personal aesthetic desire to tell stories in a richer and fuller manner? Maybe he has become too enamored of the visual arts he spends so much time teaching and writing about. Paintings after all are no longer judged on the basis of the accuracy with which they represent reality but on other bases. Some postmodern philosophers of history like F.R. Ankersmit would like historical narratives to be judged in the same way—on the basis of their style or other aesthetic features and not on their capacity to represent past reality accurately. Whether he intends to or not, Schama is certainly playing into their hands.

Or perhaps Schama is too much affected by his recent reading of imagi-

native fiction. He tells us in *The Sunday Times* feature that he is a "voracious" reader, much of it apparently in modern experimental fiction. "Jeanette Winterson's views on time are so like mine—it's quite spooky," he says. He also admires "Julian Barnes's mixture of fiction and nonfiction," and he found Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, which moves back and forth between the past and present of its historian-heroine's experience, "wonderful." What he really likes about these modern novelists is "the attention they pay to ghostly echoes and the historical perspective." "All derivative, all in the mind—the confection of fact and fantasy that is how we know the world," says Lively's heroine. If historians ever really do take seriously as models for their work the fiction of new experimental novelists like Patrick McGrath who say that they "don't want to be constrained by the actual—there's more freedom to invent when the fiction is not accountable to a reality," then they surely will put themselves out of business.

Schama apparently believes that because naive nineteenth-century positivism—"the certainty of an ultimately observable, empirically verifiable truth"—is dead, that all we have left are ghosts and shadows and indeterminacy. If we cannot recover the truth about the past with finality and completeness, then must we resort to the techniques of fiction in order to fill in the shadows and embody the ghosts? Are those the alternatives? If we cannot have old-fashioned positivist history, then must we write historical novellas?

Although, says Schama, both his stories "follow the documentary record with some closeness, they are works of imagination, not scholarship." These are not contraries. Historical scholarship should not be set in opposition to imagination. History writing is creative, and it surely requires imagination; only it is an imagination of a particular sort, sensitive to the differentness of the past and constrained and constricted by the documentary record. Schama in his better moments knows this, knows that "even in the most austere scholarly report from the archives, the inventive faculty—selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgements—is in full play." He does not deny the existence of a past reality. But he "does accept the rather banal axiom that claims for historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator."

That "fatally" is mistaken; and it has led Schama into his experiment in fictional history. One can accept the view that the historical record is fragmentary and incomplete, that recovery of the past is partial and difficult, and that historians will never finally agree in their interpretations, and yet can still believe intelligibly and not naively in an objective truth about the past that can be observed and empirically verified. Historians may never see and represent that truth wholly and finally, but some of them will come closer than others, be more nearly complete, more objective, more honest, in their written history, and we will know it, and have known it, when we see it. That knowledge is the best antidote to the destructive skepticism that is troubling us today. ||

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