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Past within the Plot

Two Narrative Historians and their Discontents

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the coexistence of ‘narrative’, popular history, which aims to tell a story to edify and entertain, with ‘structural’ history, which gained precedence in the university from the nineteenth century onward. Using the case studies of Simon Schama and Niall Ferguson, popular historians who transitioned from early ‘structural’ works to ‘narrative’ books and finally documentary, the precise nature of narrative is examined through the theory of literary historical tropes developed by Hayden White, where a political perspective engages an ‘emplotment’ where a form of narrative develops. After examining how tropes apply to the life experience, ideology and resulting emplotment of Schama and Ferguson, it looks at the academic criticisms of their narratives, in text and television documentary – namely, that the organisation of data into a compelling story negates accuracy and objectivity in the name of entertainment. Subsequently, the similarity of Schama and Ferguson’s narrative style is compared to pre-academic historical writings from before Leopold von Ranke. The final argument is that the popular history espoused by Schama and Ferguson is a re-emergence of the older, pre-academic style, based on narrative, which predates the structural history which displaced it. This dissertation concludes by examining how the two historiographies might coexist, arguing that the new narrative can offer excitement and purpose to the structural historian, giving relevance to the rigorous work of structural history.

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Chapter 1

The Narrative and its Critics

‘It's not especially charming, but it certainly isn't boring.’¹ Thus said *The Guardian*. The *New York Times* was less indulgent. ‘...Its more original hypotheses also tend to devolve into questionable generalizations (“Europeans today are the idlers of the world”), contradictory assertions and silly Power Point schemas that strain painfully to be relevant and hip.’² These two opinions, television reviews, came from opposite sides of the Anglosphere, and were some months apart. But their differing circumstances nonetheless express the divergent opinions to be had on the documentary of Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: Is the West History?* The essential argument was that ‘the West’, was losing its particular advantages (‘killer apps’ to use Ferguson’s vernacular) to other societies with which it had long competed. *The Guardian* judged it both prolix and sensationalist, lacking the rigour to which true history should aspire. It was an idea which could cause anxiety to onlookers, especially to those uninitiated to the historical details beforehand. Nonetheless, it was compelling. It offered narrative. To one who saw history as a *story*, then a great story was being offered.

The two reviews show divergent opinions which might be had of by the two sides. On the one hand, the viewer could appreciate that sense of narrative; regardless of the more controversial opinions which Ferguson gave rise to. On the other hand, the deliberate attempts to weave a narrative, and rather inaptly at that, made *Civilization* look crude and sensationalist. In this regard, Ferguson was subject to less criticism than his contemporary, Simon Schama. Also accused of imposing a narrative on his work, Schama’s handling of another topic was received in a far more irenic way. His 2006 documentary, *The Power of Art*, was praised for its attempt to make art history widely accessible to a lay

¹ S. Wollaston, Review, *The Guardian*, March 20 2011

² M. Kakutani, Review, *The New York Times*, November 14, 2011

audience, scholarly, but open: 'That fusty line between art and entertainment faded long ago.'³ Here was the other side of the same phenomenon, a popularisation which aided viewers rather than hindered them. Both Simon Schama and Niall Ferguson engaged in the realm of 'popular' and 'public history', an attempt to bring history out of the university to the public. Yet in doing so, there were certain pitfalls. The historical discipline, as perceived after being codified in the latter nineteenth century, required an absolute objectivity, a refrain from moral involvement. Here, it seemed, was an inversion: an involvement in the past which precluded the objective. Rather than seeking objectivity independent of emotion, judgment, and polemic, it embraced these very qualities in order to appeal to their audience. In emerging from their academic posts and engaging with the public, popular narrative stripped history of its former rigour. What was the relationship of these two very different, even contradictory, approaches to history?

In 1979, Lawrence Stone attempted to define these two traits, setting up a dichotomy of 'narrative' and 'structural' history. 'Narrative', he said, 'is taken to mean the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with sub-plots. The two essential ways in which narrative history differs from structural history is that its arrangement is descriptive rather than analytical and that its central focus is on man not circumstances. It therefore deals with the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical. Narrative is a mode of historical writing, but it is a mode which also affects and is affected by the content and the method.' In contrast to this, structural history 'was formulated by Ranke in the mid-nineteenth century and was based on the study of new source materials'. Instead of simply recounting events, 'close textual criticism of hitherto undisclosed records...would once and for all establish the facts of political history'. However, three competing sub-genres of history derived from it: the Marxist, *Annales* form based on ecology and demographics, and "American 'cliometric'

³ Alessandra Stanley, Review, *The New York Times*, June 18, 2007

methodology.”⁴ Therefore, if narrative had its flaws, then structural history could not necessarily claim a full coherence to counter narrative with. While allowing for the questions as to what coherence these concepts have, they shall be the working definitions for the phenomena described. Although they are not necessarily precise, they are helpful in two ways. Firstly, while Stone could not necessarily offer precise definitions, he did recognise two distinct forms of historical writing. Secondly, his observation, and misgivings about narrative history, were being made as early as 1979, about such figures as Trevor-Roper, Elton, and even Le Roy Ladurie, whose *Montaillou* (1975) was deemed by Stone to be mere ‘antiquarianism’, interesting, no doubt, but not necessarily useful.⁵ Stone expresses an anxiety over the future viability of history with the revival of narrative; even if history has been written so in the past, can it meet viable standards of rigour? ⁶ What place does literary narrative have together with the scrupulous checking of ‘facts’?

To discuss such a question, Hayden White offers a theory of exploring the matter of hand. White’s work on the literary dimension of history argues that historical discourse by its nature subject to ‘emplotment’, its formation into a story, and thus a literary genre, with the same devices as those in history. A story is imposed on the events, giving it a coherence to the reader, but one which may not necessarily exist. Emplotment is more, however. It is the personal experience of the historian, who has his or her own experience, inevitably reflected in the work. The discussion of motivations is an inevitable exercise in empathy, and the result is a search for similarity with the historian’s past and the peoples being studied. It is also a search for meaning: to create a story similar to the historian’s own experience gives it a meaning and relevance which otherwise might not be found. Toward this end, different tropes, or tropics (*Tropics of Discourse*, in one of White’s works), provide a theory of

⁴ Lawrence Stone, ‘The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History’, *Past & Present*,

November 1979, 83-85

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24

emplotment; as literary devices, they show how a discourse is shaped as a story.⁷ In applying these modes, the aim is to deconstruct the work of Schama and Ferguson as a product of their time, and looking at what status their work occupies. Is the writing of popular narrative history by respected historians a new phenomenon? Or are there parallels with the past, anchoring it into a past discourse?

The state of play within the Academy, therefore, is a tension between structural and narrative history. On one hand, narrative offers a sense of meaning and relevance to the lay reader, whilst for the seasoned historian, narrative comes in the way of the facts, disturbing reality with an imposed story. The carefully researched monograph and the popular television series may appear to be polar opposite. The questions examined are whether the relative values of narrative and structure – meaning and relevance versus objective depiction – can coexist in the academic environment, or whether the two are in unresolvable conflict.

This is strictly a discussion of narrative history in the English-speaking world; the path taken by popular historians in other languages is a topic beyond this work. By no means should the existence of strictly analytical, dispassionate history in film be discounted. What is about to be discussed is a single type of historical documentary, not the genre in its entirety. And while there are other historians, such as David Starkey, Simon Sebag Montefiore and others, it is useful to limit observations to only two, who have a number of similarities, but also differences, to see the theory in practice. Schama and Ferguson were both were born in a similar time period, and both are British, thus sharing in the events of the late twentieth century, the same society, and thus a similar discourse. At the same time, they occupied different places and ideological position within that society, allowing some different viewpoints to be explored. A second point of contention is that both Schama and Ferguson work as the foremost instances of their type. They are charismatic figures whose television work is based on lending their own personality to the narrative. They have not only gone beyond the pale of what Stone

⁷ H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 121

called 'structural history'; they have been highly successful outside of it. Yet it is highly possible that within a few decades or even years, they will both be forgotten, part of the transitory course of popular culture.

I: The Beginnings of Popular History

The particular form of media in which Schama and Ferguson engaged their audiences is documentary for television, which requires a small history in itself. Although documentary developed in the early twentieth century, the form in the English-speaking world as we know it today was matured by Kenneth Clark in his series *Civilisation* (1969).⁸ This work was something of a paradox in that it looked both backwards and forwards. In the still-exciting medium of colour film, Clark presented the development of Western Civilisation following the fall of Rome, against the backdrop of the very locations discussed. Instead of a disembodied voice speaking over footage, an erudite figure 'guided' the viewer through the landscape, creating a more intimate sense of connection with the material. On the other hand, *Civilisation* offered a profoundly conservative interpretation. Clark was producing in the aftermath of the 1968 student rebellions, and promoted a classicist view of Eurocentric culture; at the conclusion, on a melancholy note, he confessed himself to be a 'believer in institutions'.⁹

Entertaining while educating, such a format proved highly popular in subsequent years. Jacob Bronowski replicated Clark's formula in *The Ascent of Man* (1973), arguing the thesis of human advancement through science, attempting to do for the sciences what Clark had done for the humanities.¹⁰ Clark's work would soon fade into obscurity, but his style endured. Ferguson himself

⁸ K. Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View by Kenneth Clark* (London, BBC, 1969)

⁹ *Ibid.*, Episode 13, *Heroic Materialism*, 41.53-43.27

¹⁰ J. Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man* (London, BBC, 1973)

noted *Civilisation*, for its similar title to *Civilization*, while noting impatience with its focus on art. Schama, while planning *A History of Britain*, noted his sense of Clark's spectre, an example to imitate. For all its popularity, however, the *Civilisation* mode would have one essential flaw. In the hour or so needed to convey information in an engaging manner to a public audience, key parts of an argument could be simplified or dropped. The implications of this work for the interactions of education, history and the public sphere had profound consequences.

2: Academic Origins

Simon Schama's earliest work already combined flair with erudition. His earliest two works, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands 1780–1813* (1977), and *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel* (1978) were followed by the book which brought him to attention: *The Embarrassment of Riches* (1987). The reception of this work is notable in terms of the historical context. Reviewing the book for *The New Republic*, J.H. Elliott stressed that the Netherlands was a 'libertarian' state, which with its free trade and religious tolerance, defied the conventional wisdom of baroque absolutism, Elliott's own field of study.¹¹ The book was thus being fitted into the neoliberal mould of the 1980s, a ghost of the Anglo-American model on the Zuiderzee. Schama's next book, *Citizens*, (1989), was somewhat less well received, although it had a higher profile. One reviewer acknowledged the book's 'outstanding' place, but attacked it for 'lack of sophisticated class analysis' and 'overstated and at times melodramatic revisionism'.¹² Schama's somewhat backward-looking thesis, which argued that the revolution was flawed from the start and had no benefits, seemed a contradiction to the model which *The Embarrassment of Riches* appeared to uphold. Nevertheless, both works were noted for their literary quality. Schama had perfected an 'overweight' style, combining rich allusions and anecdotes with

¹¹ J.H. Elliott, 'From Bogs to Riches', *The New Republic*, vol. 197, no. 8, 28

¹² Greisman, Harvey Clark, *Citizens: A Chronicle of The French Revolution*, Review, *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 19, no. 2, March 1990, 205-206

colloquialisms. This propelled *The Embarrassment of Riches* from academic journals into the pages of *The New Republic*, to an audience which was keen to learn, but also to be entertained. This was the post-scholarly mode perfected: maintaining academic quality whilst still attractive outside the academy.

Ferguson's own first book was *Paper and Iron* (1995), an investigation of hyperinflation in Weimar Hamburg. This was followed by the two-volume *The House of Rothschild*, which won the Wadsworth Prize for Business History. Both books were politely received in academic journals, but had little reception beyond academic circles. The most striking aspect of these two works was their comparatively restrained quality in comparison to Ferguson's later works, especially in comparison to even the earliest books of Schama. This early work was situated firmly within the academy, and was destined to remain there. Ferguson's first departure from these early scholarly works was *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1997). Here, Ferguson too edited a series of 'Counterfactuals': alternative scenarios had an historical event not occurred. In focussing on events as pivotal, Ferguson attempted to refute E. H. Carr's dismissal of virtual history as a 'mere parlour game'.¹³ In defence of the genre, Ferguson used citations from Gibbon and Trevelyan to argue for a place to the counterfactual; Gibbon's musings about the Battle of Poitiers being an example.¹⁴ Subsequently, Ferguson makes the argument for peaceful German hegemony, had Britain not been active in the First World War.¹⁵ His next chapter, written with Andrew Roberts, took the further step of hypothesizing a fascist Britain had Hitler invaded in 1940.¹⁶ His idea of the First World War was re-used in *The Pity of War* (1998).¹⁷ What distinguished this work was its combination of revisionism and relaxed style. In his

¹³ N. Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, Picador, 1997), 4

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 228

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 281

¹⁷ N. Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (London, Allen Lane, 1998)

depiction of the First World War, Ferguson undermined numerous theses; most controversially, his claim that had Germany won the Great War, it would have presided over a peaceful, unified Europe.¹⁸

These musings can be seen as an active work of emplotment. Instead of merely fitting events into a narrative frame, Ferguson took the additional step of manipulating events, imagining alternative scenarios. The effect of these early works was to blur the difference between story and history, a narrative mentality which contemplates what might have been. Furthermore, it was not merely Ferguson, but eight other historians who wrote counterfactual speculations, indicating that 'story' was seen as a component part of the historical profession. If one can re-write the story, then it can be deduced that it is a story which underlies the work.

3: *An Emplotment of One's Own*

There is a degree of emplotment and narrative to any history. How does the historian's own experience determine the shape of their own work? Hayden White's theory of tropes argues that political outlooks imply a certain type of story. A political conservative, for example, will employ a comic trope, that is, a story with a happy ending, stressing the benefits of the existing system and offering future happiness if the system is sustained. A liberal, by contrast, will use a satirical trope, trivialising the matter in farcical terms in order to call for change. A radical uses a tragic mode, offering a stark choice between the suffering before and the desperate need for something better: a stirring tale of revolution in which there are few easy solutions. In coming to these points of view, an historian must have a background of their own, shaping their opinions and thus providing the impetus for their preferred trope.¹⁹ In looking at the origins of Schama and Ferguson, one can see the means in

¹⁸ Ibid., 460

¹⁹ White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 29

which medium influences the means of narrative undertaken. Integral to the understanding of history is to think of historians themselves as products of their societies. E.H. Carr captured this lucidly: ‘He is also a social phenomenon, both the product of the conscious and unconscious spokesmen of the society to which he belongs; it is in this capacity that he approaches the facts of the historical past.’²⁰

Vision and sensory appeals can make an appeal to the viewer more subtly than an overt argument can. The use of colour, sound, and texture (or lack thereof) can manipulate the viewer beyond an argument devoid of ornament. This mode of presentation becomes an additional trope by which a viewer is entranced. A mere statistic of war deaths may not move the viewer to pacifism, but the grim footage of misery, whether enacted or in archive footage, is far more moving. Having examined the workings of narrative, it is fitting to see the motivations for Schama and Ferguson’s own emplotments.

Simon Schama was born in 1945 in London, but grew up in Southend-on-Sea in Essex. The family was of Jewish ancestry, combining Lithuanian Ashkenazi with Romanian heritage. ‘My father always said,’ Schama recounted in an interview with the *Jewish Chronicle*, ‘...that we were originally from Izmir, involved in spice trading and all that. My father was into Sephardi glamour. But it might be true.’ He was subsequently brought up in Judaism: ‘As a child, I taught kids Hebrew and chumash. Then, inevitably, I stopped believing in God.’²¹ At the same time, his upbringing was rural, and he openly cited it as an influence on his early study, *Landscape and Memory*. ‘I had no hill...but I did have the Thames. It was not the upstream river that the poets in my Palgrave claimed bumbled betwixt mossy

²⁰ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, Penguin, 1961), 35

²¹ B. Silverstone, ‘Simon Schama’s Art of Making History’, *The Jewish Chronicle*, September 27 2006

<http://website.thejc.com/home.aspx?Aid=46437&ATypeId=1&search=true2&srchtxt=1&srchhead=1&srchauthor=1&srchsandp=1&scsrch=0>

banks. ... It was the low, gull-swept estuary, the marriage bed of salt and fresh water, stretching as far as I could see...' ²² At this point, an identity forms: Schama is formed both as a creature of rural England, part of a traditional culture which saw itself as quintessentially English. At the same time, he had a heritage from far beyond Southend-on-Sea, yet was itself deeply rooted in another tradition. In 1956, he won a scholarship to an independent boys' school, and on to Christ's College, Cambridge, graduating in 1966. ²³ Yet it can be argued that this identity developed extensively to influence his subsequent work, formed before he began his academic training. *Landscape and Memory* articulates the building up of memory on a particular site, because humanity is far more fickle. ²⁴ Situated between varying identities, and highly aware of them, Schama works from a vantage point which appreciates the sense of division. The metaphors of land, of tradition, and continuity, are elements which sit between those identities. Eluded by clear labels, he focuses on the act of seeing: the richly visual instinct, part of a world where labels do not fit his experience, but the act of seeing and feeling works. This vision is the result of his own past experience, an example of White's process of emplotment. In White's theory, this form of emplotment is satirical – that is, based around a sense of meaninglessness, lacking pattern, and accidental. The associated argument is contextualist, looking for disparate components across a common paradigm. The political outlook of such a telling is Liberal: open to change, yet still remaining within the basic social and political framework.

Niall Ferguson's early life offered a different experience of the late twentieth century. He was born in Glasgow in 1964, nineteen years after Schama and thus able to experience the economic decline of the

²² S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, (London, Random House, 1996), 3-4

²³ Profile, <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arthistory/faculty/Schama.html>, last accessed October 8, 2013

²⁴ Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 40-41

1970s at a formative point in life.²⁵ However, there was also the background of the city itself: highly industrialised in the nineteenth century and self-proclaimed ‘Second City of the Empire’. Following the decline of the British Empire during the twentieth, much of the cityscape decayed and urban poverty increased.²⁶ The result was to make this the ‘landscape’ against which Ferguson grew up: industrialisation was synonymous with past greatness. Indeed, in his early work, *Paper and Iron* (1990), Ferguson referred to Hamburg as ‘the German Glasgow’; a city that was not aesthetically attractive, but great as a result of nineteenth century colonialism and industry, and cut down by twentieth century travails.²⁷ This mental narrative is underlined by the family background: the son of a doctor and a physics teacher, Ferguson came from the middle-class background which was nurtured by the Industrial Revolution in Scotland, and hence a certain assortment of cultural traits: a stress on hard work, educational achievement, and an attribution of these habits to the legacy of Calvinism, the austere creed which made Scotland great.²⁸ To look back upon this Victorian achievement in contrast to the imperial decline of the twentieth century shaped a mode of thought which inevitably longed to restore that greatness, and which discerned a set of ingredients: cultural Calvinism, colonial empire, and economic analysis. It is this inheritance which shaped the work of Ferguson as much as that of Schama upon himself – a personal history within the history which he wrote.

Empire and Civilisation, with its celebratory tone of colonisation and the lasting Anglosphere community and values which it established, is in White’s framework closet to a Comedy – it is bound to a happy ending, and based around the solidity of the community in the face of a challenge. Ferguson almost fits

²⁵ Niall Ferguson, Profile, <http://www.hoover.org/fellows/10040>, last accessed October 8 2013

²⁶ ‘This much I know’, *The Observer*, January 18 2009

²⁷ N. Ferguson, *Paper and Iron: Hamburg Politics and German Politics in the Era of Inflation, 1807-1927* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 48

²⁸ ‘The Observer Profile: Niall Ferguson’, *The Observer*, Sunday 18 June 2006

this trope, save for his warnings if the status quo fades. Comedy is naturally conservative, based as it is around the preservation of what currently exists. Although his simple description of social elements does have shades of the ‘mechanical’ (deemed by White as linked to radicalism and Tragedy), it can be deemed Organic in that all the component parts – industrialisation, missionary fervour and democratic values – work together for the greater good.

When considering the individual plots of Schama and Ferguson in context with what they produced, White’s theory of emplotment becomes more lucid. Within their books and documentaries, with its sweep of narrative, one can perceive their own efforts to imbue an event with meaning, to give it relevance to their own experience. To their audiences, who enjoy their work because they themselves identify with the narrative, and its associated ideology, the narrative mode served a desire for relevance both among its creators and recipients. However, the very appeal to the present, hidden within the past, the implicit personalisation of history compromised its integrity.

4: *The Politics of Narrative*

A difficulty exists in the particular political alignment of Schama. For Ferguson, there are no ambiguities: he is openly ‘Thatcherite’ with the resulting opinions highly present in his analysis. Schama, by contrast, is far more ambiguous in alignment. Many of his concerns fit into a leftist model of pluralism; the tolerance of Golden Age Dutch society to the arrival of immigrants, fleeing intolerance and home, fundamentally making the nation which welcomed them.²⁹ This exists alongside a concern for the poor in his volumes of *A History of Britain*, where he analysis the Peasants’ Revolt in terms of the rising peasantry who had broken from serfdom, expanded their plots and become

²⁹ Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 587

modestly prosperous, and faced rising taxation reducing them back to peasants.³⁰ This is, quite clearly, a story of the transition from feudal to capitalist: ‘Was this a class war, a term we are not supposed to use since the official burial of Marxism? Yes, it was.’³¹ To use class analysis so confidently would fit Schama quite clearly into the field of Marxist history, but an ambiguity emerges in the context of his other work. Indeed, the work for which he was famous, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, expresses an unease with the Revolution which he describes. He describes the last years of the *Ancien Régime* as a period of the steady expansion and acceptance of Enlightenment ideals.³² This reasonably optimistic picture was shattered by 1789, which was by its very nature highly violent: ‘What killed the monarchy was its inability to create representative institutions through which the state could execute its program of reform. Had the Revolution done any better?’³³ In *A History of Britain*, the same attitude comes to the fore with the Reformation, which turns from the traditional Whig view of liberation to the destruction of a popular, lax Church and its replacement with an authoritarian one which ruthlessly tore out all dissent.³⁴ His description of the dissolution of the monasteries is typical: ‘An ancient way of life was destroyed ... Cromwell and his men liked to style themselves as reformers – wreckers, more likely...they always seemed to enjoy their work a bit too much...reduced to delectable family tales of headless nuns, and spectral monks.’³⁵ This view is one of cultural conservatism, mourning the losses of vanished eras, coexisting with class analysis and a championing of the forces of change. A contradiction exists at the heart of Schama’s historiography, one which can only be reconciled by examining his own cultural background.

³⁰S. Schama, *A History of Britain* (BBC, 2000), Episode 5: *King Death*, 24:50-25:15

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25:20-26:20

³² S. Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, A.A. Knopf, 1989), 52, 194-199

³³*Ibid.*, 857

³⁴ Schama, *A History of Britain*, Episode 6 *Burning Convictions*, 3:22-3:45

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.09-36.09

A possible explanation for Schama's contradictory perspectives lies in a dual cultural identity. From an immigrant background with one rich, strong tradition, and growing up with a setting in a different culture, Schama's work combines both an eye for those outside the mainstream with a protective regard for a heritage under threat. The writings on the English Reformation are what connect the Reign of Terror to the Peasants' Revolt; the anger of the peasants at losing their gains to an authoritarian government and the lynching of suspected subversive in the Terror are united by the beloved images and shrines of Tudor society being banished by a callously authoritarian government.³⁶

Yet another characteristic of Schama's approach is his sense of the ironic. A repeated motif in Schama's work is the sense of the absurd, to tease the reader with the irony of the situation. In his discussions of the French Revolution, a macabre humour emerges, following the seeming pointlessness of the deaths: 'A large crowd, curious to see the virago who could have perpetuated such a crime, pressed into the rue Saint-Honoré to her pass... "Her beautiful face was so calm", he wrote, "that one would have said she was a statue. Behind her, young girls held each other's hands as they danced. For eight days I was in love with Charlotte Corday.'³⁷ Schama's citation captures the emotional effect of the Terror: a 'revolutionary' was so fetishized and adored that her horrific death was beside the point. Richard J. Evans argued that *Citizens* made the Revolution 'almost meaningless in a larger sense...reduced to a theatre of the absurd'.³⁸ Yet at other points the same irony is lighter: Schama's account of a monumental elephant in the Place de la Bastille shows the irrevocable nature of revolution. The plaster elephant erected by Napoleon to cover the memory of the Revolution, to be rebuilt later in bronze, is never built at all, and neither does the marble version planned by the restored Bourbons. The edifice

³⁶ Ibid., 42.05-42.50

³⁷ Schama, *Citizens*, 741

³⁸ Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, Granta, 1997), 245

decays, and the monument inevitably crumbles after the 1848 revolution, and its memory becomes a living proof that for all its faults, the Revolution is irreversible.³⁹ It is unrealistic to deem Schama a reactionary; his is supportive of what came. However, the Revolution is deemed needless, expressed in the satirical description of events. It is perhaps best to understand the divergent modes of political thought as a product of the coexistence of two cultures. The contradictory values which must be made sense of, and identification with both. The analysis is not so much a political vision as an appreciation of the complexities of historical experience. For Evans, *Citizens* makes 'utterly compelling reading, in which most effort has gone into structuring the narrative, and rather less into building an interpretation', the objective of structural history.

This brief diversion is important in considering the modes of emplotment. White argued that particular political views tended toward different narratives. By arranging the data in this form, a story with human appeal can be created from the mass of facts and figures, one which a wider audience may want. In disembarking from the academy and offering the past as a tale, both Ferguson and Schama could reach beyond the academy to one of the deepest human needs: a sense of narrative. Both quite naturally took to the new medium of documentary.

5: *Popular History and its Discontents*

The medium of documentary fundamentally differs from written text: presentation must be an appeal to the senses. Sight and sound must be manoeuvred in a way that a writer need not consider. In other ways, however, there is a similarity: both are acts of presenting, and both are literary. Indeed, in the form of script, text nestles within film, determining what is to be depicted. The presenter, however, must be on par with the script, doing it justice. This sensory aspect, therefore, is not strictly separate

³⁹ Schama, *Citizens*, 3-5

from, literary means. The television medium is an extension of the literary tools used in text, narrative by other means.

Ferguson and Schama were both relatively unusual in that they had an influence over their work. Their usually univocal documentaries differ from the disembodied narrator who refers to 'talking heads', experts who act in the capacity of structural historians, providing the fact which is then arranged as narrative. They also differed in being toward the top of a broad spectrum in quality: despite a superficial similarity to much similar hackwork, to have a presenter already qualified in the academic sphere was a novelty. However, there was an undeniable blurring of prerogative and quality which placed both Schama and Ferguson under academic scrutiny.

Schama's documentary series *A History of Britain* (2000) aimed to be a comprehensive personal overview of British history. In it, much of the Clark formula was repeated. It was a commercial success, drawing 4.4 million viewers for the second episode, 20 per cent of audiences.⁴⁰ However, in a forum in the *American Historical Review*, nine years later, *A History of Britain* was subjected to an extensive critique of its focuses and structure. In particular, Linda Levy Peck described his work as Anglocentric, making occasional diversions to Scotland, Ireland and Wales, but in the same manner that he shifted to Normandy to discuss William the Conqueror, or India for the British Empire. In this regard, it was emphatically an *English* history.⁴¹ Furthermore, according to Miri Rubin, another figure on the panel, it was elite history which was discussed, not the broader social history. Fitting in with a broader popular cult of celebrity, 'Underlying *A History of Britain* is the belief that human nature, particularly the nature of those born to rule, is timeless, unchanging, and thus easily recognizable by viewers who may love or loathe the characters'. It was not 'a patchwork quilt', as she had hoped:

⁴⁰ S. Schama, 'Fine-Cutting Clio', *The Public Historian*, vol. 25, no. 3, Summer 2003, p. 25

⁴¹ L. Levy Peck, 'Schama's Britannia', *American Historical Review*, no. 114, June, 2009, 676

instead ‘a shimmering cape of many colors but of a single texture: luxurious silk’.⁴² She also criticised the absence of ‘talking heads’, experts who offered alternative opinions. Here, instead, was a single voice offering a single version of events. Underlying the critiques of Rubin and Levy Peck was a sense of departure between their own careful, painstaking work within the academy, and the shimmering cape which Schama and his production had crafted.

Of Levy Peck’s argument, Schama deflected criticism by virtue of a single particle: it was *A*, not *The History*, and therefore allowed for personal opinions.⁴³ Against Rubin, he argued, there had been helpings of social history, but had been used to underpin a wider narrative from above.⁴⁴ The difficulty was, of course, that many views were not strictly Schama’s. A whole range of revisionist historiographies were marshalled to create the most easily controversial history imaginable. The Revisionist view of the Reformation was one, but more ironic was his use of Calgacus’s speech following the Roman invasion: “‘They make it a desolation, and they call it peace’. This was made up long after the event Tacitus, and it is entirely Roman, not Scottish... like Britannia itself, the idea of Free Caledonia, was from the first a Roman invention.”⁴⁵ And yet this was the Schama who so eloquently expressed Scottish grievances.⁴⁶ In occasional points, he was conventional; the reminiscences about the British landscape, expressed most eloquently in the soaring camerawork.

⁴² M. Rubin, ‘The B.B.C.’s *A History of Britain*,’ *American Historical Review*, no. 114, June, 2009, 665-666

⁴³ S. Schama, ‘*A History of Britain: A Response*’, *The American Historical Review*, no. 114, June, 2009, p. 693

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 695

⁴⁵ Schama, *A History of Britain*, Episode 1, 27:17-28-30

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49:00-.51:10

Schama was far more controversial in his 2008 *American Future*. In this, his approach was thematic rather than chronological, examining the history of the United States through the somewhat transitory lens of Barack Obama's election; here was the point that a highly hopeful nation could leave its ambiguous past behind and emerge as the fulfilment of its own ideals. The responses by American audiences, however, reveal that many Americans were far more uneasy by Schama's breezy narrative than the British onlooker.⁴⁷ British reviewers also found it difficult to watch: one claimed that 'such stuff sits uneasily alongside the purple prose that teeters between pretentiousness and banality.'⁴⁸ The lack of empathy displayed by Schama was peculiar when compared to the success of his 2005 *Rough Crossings*, which examined the phenomenon of slavery in America. Here, critics praised his ability to reveal the reality of British ties to the slave trade, but also to give a sense of the reality of slave life to his audience. 'While other historians might scurry away to see if his evocative account of, say, the streets of London or of the terror of a mid-Atlantic storm might fit the facts, Schama's readers will remain gripped by the force of his writing.'⁴⁹ While such a review was complimentary of Schama's gifts as a storyteller, there is nonetheless a critical comparison of his work to 'serious' history, the accuracy of facts being ignored at the expense of study. It foreshadowed the difficulties which *American Future* would face, assembling a narrative from the prosaic facts, one which strained the very definition of 'history'. From a beginning in careful academia, Schama's reliability was questioned, due to his stress on narrative.

Ferguson's own work occupied an even more transitory appeal, trading on the anxieties of his audience. Three of his documentaries show the extent of his work. *Empire* claimed to vindicate the cause of the British Empire; while decrying slavery, Ferguson tried to claim that in its export of

⁴⁷ S. Schama, *The American Future: A History*, (BBC 2, 2008)

⁴⁸ D. Sandbrook, *The Observer*, October 12, 2008

⁴⁹ J. Walvin, *The Observer*, September 3 2005.

industry, its abolitionism and ‘progress’, the Empire was ultimately a force for good.⁵⁰ *The War of the World* (2006) was controversial in a different way: Ferguson claimed that the twentieth century was unique in the extent of its genocide, and synthesised an array of genocides throughout the twentieth century.⁵¹ Ultimately, he tied it to the modern anxiety on the Right over immigration into Europe – the possibility of another century of horrors. Despite being described as ‘A New History of the Twentieth Century’ it was essentially a conventional parable of racism. Its final frames speak of immigration into Europe from the Muslim world; will European Muslims be another victimised minority in the next century?⁵² Finally, *The Ascent of Money* (2008), ostensibly trying to prove the fundamental goodness of finance, undertook a prolix amassing of the history of money-making. It claimed to be a defence of the financial industry at the onset of recession.⁵³

Such works were easily derided for being ‘merely’ entertaining. Of several dismissals mooted by Janet Coles and Paul Armstrong, was that such works were simply too brief: what normally took several hundred pages and an array of footnotes was replaced by an hour of footage, which lacked the space to explore history in depth.⁵⁴ Entertainment also compromised fact. A mere accumulation of data is not enough for a jaded public: facts must be adjusted, worked into a satisfying narrative, to hold the attention of the novice. Finally, and perhaps the most severe of all the criticisms, was that they were deliberately sensationalist, one which was particularly harsh on Ferguson, whose works so often touched raw nerves, and very often from an unacceptable political view; an ode to capitalism rankled with the economic crisis of 2008. The overall question was whether this courting of controversy was degrading the historical profession. The popularisation of history was a vulgarisation, playing on

⁵⁰ N. Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, (New York, Basic Books, 2003)

⁵¹ N. Ferguson, *The War of the World: A New History of the 20th Century*, Episode 1, 2:52-3:39

⁵² *Ibid.*, Episode 6,

⁵³ M. Hirsh, ‘Follow the Money’, *The New York Times*, December 25, 2008

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 185-86

popular prejudices and abandoning the crystalline objectivity which had supposedly been the historical mode since the nineteenth century.⁵⁵

All of these arguments are essentially accusations of crudity. The publication of tie-in books could answer the first: from the printed scripts of Kenneth Clark's time, the accounts which Schama and Ferguson published were thick tomes, with copious footnotes and arguments which could be pressed more vigorously. However, the other claims are more difficult; does scholarly history always avoid the tropes of narrative, and is not relevance not the reason for which a book is read, even the most removed?

6: *The Critique of Narrative and its Response*

I have so far spoken about the critique, both academic and popular, of television. However, potent criticisms had already been directed at the use of narrative in text. This was a critique coming from the equals of Schama and Ferguson, and constituted an accusation, namely that they lacked the academic credentials worthy of good history. Alan B. Spitzer wrote a careful criticism in 1993, when the euphoria of 1989, the bicentenary of the French Revolution, had died down, the crop of historical works which resulted from the anniversary could be properly assessed. Schama's work, Spitzer argued, was a false narrative, and in the service of his vision had committed errors of interpretation. Much of the previous historiography, such as George T. Matthews, whom Schama actually cited on the *Ancien Régime* financial system, maintained the traditional view that that French royal finances were terminally inefficient.⁵⁶ Schama had argued that eighteenth century finances should not be judged by

⁵⁵ Janet Coles & Paul Armstrong, 'Dumbing Down History through Popular Culture: Communities of Interest or Learning as Consumption?', University of Leeds, Paper presented at the 37th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 3-5 July 2007, Queen's University Belfast

⁵⁶ A. B. Spitzer, Narrative's Problems: The Case of Simon Schama', *The Journal of Modern History*, vol, 65, no. 1, March, 1993, 182

twentieth century standards, yet the very enthusiasm for British and American ideals which he described was in fact evidence that such standards were contemporary. Such little irregularities, Spitzer argued, were distorted to fit Schama's narrative of a viable *Ancien Régime*, terminated by an aberration; inconsistencies were glossed over by appeals to the violence of the Terror.⁵⁷

The primary criticism aimed at Niall Ferguson, by contrast, was that he was 'a nostalgist for empire', an ideological slant which obscured difficult questions about the ideology in itself.⁵⁸ What Ferguson had argued was that the British Empire had made positive contributions: its abolitionism, its promotion of education, its protection of democratic institutions. However, in the critique of Jon Wilson, Ferguson had bought too highly into the idea of a 'civilizing mission' which the British Empire promoted: the English language, Protestantism, Capitalism, and its legal system. Ferguson's call to take up 'the White Man's Burden' a quote of Kipling without any irony, made him appear to defend the less savoury aspects of the empire. Was this a distortion of facts to serve a grand narrative of 'how Britain made the modern world'?

What was a reason given for this loose appeal to popular narrative? Richard J. Evans made an argument that it was the fault of 1980s neoliberalism. Wanting to undermine the leftist agenda of university departments, Thatcher and Reagan both cut funding to universities: hence, historians had to branch out into the popular sphere, entertainment dressed as education.⁵⁹ Ferguson's sole response is his *Counterfactuals* book, with its argument for a self-conscious rethinking of events as if it were a novel. Schama, however, did offer an insight into the making of popular history. In his own recounting of making *A History of Britain*, Schama described a tug of war between his own attempt to present a

⁵⁷ Ibid., 184

⁵⁸ J. Wilson, 'Niall Ferguson's Imperial Passion', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 56, Autumn 2003, p. 175-183

⁵⁹ Evans, 198-199

plausible account, and the attempt of the B.B.C. to present entertainment on Saturday nights. His own suggestions to take a more scholarly approach were greeted with incredulous dismissal by the committee. This initial description would seem to suggest a lack of agency for his part, being the mostly passive instrument of a broadcaster. However, other details indicate that Schama did take a more active role. In collaboration with the crew, an endeavour was made toward something more subtle:

On many occasions, though, we simply allowed the script to conjure up a scene for the viewers, who instead of having clumsy re-enactments put in front of them, were given something like the opposite: shots of suggestive emptiness with which they could "piece out the scene for themselves. Instead, for example, of having a costumed actress sit in a boat in the Solway Firth pretending to be Mary Queen of Scots on the run from her Scottish enemies and being rowed to what she imagined, tragically, to be her asylum with Queen Elizabeth, the director Clare Beavan decided on a very long, slow, tracking shot parallel to the English shore. What viewers literally see is nothing but the lapping of waves and the distant shore of southern Scotland. But when the script describes in voice-over a bedraggled woman dressed in men's clothes, her hair shorn, her hopes pathetically optimistic, staring at the receding Scotland, we hoped that this is indeed what viewers would "see" in the eye of their imagination. And so, they told us, they did.⁶⁰

What we are seeing is something between pristinely academic and crudely popular. Schama had tensions with the film production, but he nowhere even hints a material motive. On the contrary, his insistence on a correct mode of production shows more than an interest in the integrity of the work: sensitivity to popular perception. However, the use of film to 'suggest' what the viewer ought to see is something novel. To place the viewer in the shoes of the personage is undoubtedly a literary endeavour: it is the work of a storyteller. While in dispute with his managers, he has a conscious part in the creative process, using literary means to bring the facts to the viewer. The use of this visual

⁶⁰ Schama, 'Fine-Cutting Clio', 23-24

medium reveals an important question about Schama and Ferguson's mode: an argument in vision, rather than words, from evidence to presentation. For other seasoned public historians, it is a fair suggestion that they too, have had a similar role, using the advantages of documentary to consciously mould their work in a literary manner.

Narrative may take this visual form, but in Schama and Ferguson's earlier works, they demonstrated a written narrative mode which translated easily into film. In some ways, they were part of a move of history back to a pre-Rankean mode, into the world of Macaulay and Gibbon. These two historians were rhetorical figures, who aimed to convince and argue rather than analyse, and it was their works, rather than the 'scientific' histories of the later nineteenth century, which were revered classics. In attempting to pursue popularity and precision, Schama and Ferguson could attempt a similar feat. The subsequent task is to search pre-modern history. In particular the modes of history before Ranke were arguably pre-scholarly, using entertainment and polemic as their keys. We now turn to that pre-modern mode, the life of history before it entered the academy, to see its resemblances.

Chapter 2

Narrative Unearthed

The approach to Schama and Ferguson so far has been to treat it in the realm of the ultra-modern: documentaries and popular books not too far removed from our own time, within the last thirty years, which one almost hesitates to call ‘history’. Yet up until the mid-nineteenth century, history served a variety of different purposes. In its simplest form, history can be called a recounting of past events; this can refer to specific dates, or to long trends. It certainly predates the abstract, scientific methods created in nineteenth century Germany, based on careful archival research. What appears as one looks back further is a similar vision to earlier modes of history – what might be designated a pre-scholarly mode.

1: *Evolution of the Historical Discipline*

Roman society saw the writing of history as a literary activity. Its main forum was at a *recitatio*, where various literary endeavours took place.⁶¹ In this place, letters, poetry and essays were read by the author to audience, ostensibly for the purposes of constructive criticism, but also to display the writer’s rhetorical abilities.⁶² The models taken were Herodotus and Thucydides, but their contemporary imitations frequently took on the motive of comparing the idealised virtue of previous

⁶¹ W. A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), 39

⁶² *Ibid.*, 26

eras with the decadence of the day – a trope which still has its exponents.⁶³ Not least was its style. Livy was renowned for ‘rich creaminess (*lactea ubertas*)’,⁶⁴ while Tacitus was remembered for his ‘staccato and enigmatic turns of phrase, biting and agonised epigrams, garish flashes of metaphor out of the surrounding gloom’.⁶⁵ The point is that the stress on entertainment, which marked the historical discipline. No necessary division was seen with older models of Greek history, because its aim was to entertain and to edify. The result was to use reality to teach a lesson to the audience, but with a measure of finesse.

The twin themes which preoccupied Roman historians were the moral exemplar and lesson of depravity. Livy in particular tried to summon the golden age of primitive Rome to shame moderns: his exemplar of Lucretia, who committed suicide rather than be raped, was an extreme case.⁶⁶ Tacitus preferred cases of lurid depravity, focussing on the crimes and perversions of early emperors to show how the formerly virtuous Roman state was slowly corrupted by luxury. His counterpoint to Lucretia was Nero’s murder of his own mother, who had in turn poisoned her husband in order to secure a reign for her own son.⁶⁷ Both of these examples have been questioned in terms of morality; just how were these events touched up for dramatic effect? It is perhaps not surprising that medieval audiences preferred Livy’s smooth slow of edification to Tacitus, who survived in a single ninth century copy.⁶⁸ However the reason was to make a point: by showing the deeds of the past, a mirror was held to the present, rather than to accurately render events. It was fundamentally a discipline based on exaggeration of events to affect its audience.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 61

⁶⁴ M. Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (Letchworth, Garden City Press, 1970), 224

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 292

⁶⁶ Livy, tr. B. Radice, *Rome and Italy* (London, Penguin, 1982), 1.57-60

⁶⁷ Tacitus, tr. M. Grant, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (London, Penguin, 1956), 14.4-14.8

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Introduction, 22

Subsequent pre-modern Western cultures continued this treatment, with or without a religious trope. To the Medieval mind, history was the working of divine providence, and monastic chronicles were typically framed between a retelling of the Christian story, and an account of the Apocalypse, so as to provide context. Despite this Theological framing, history lacked respectability. According to Friedrich Heer, history became an object of ridicule from Scholastic philosophers, because it fundamentally lacked the rigour of their own precise discipline.⁶⁹ When looking to the ancients, however, the older Roman model was preferred: an absence of Greek learning precluded Hellenic modes. Part of this was simply the classicism of medieval thought, which respected all authority, secular or religious, if the latter was not undermined. But with the Renaissance, a purer Roman approach resurfaced. The Duke of Urbino had Livy read during meals, commissioned editions, as with every other Latin classic, from the calligrapher; from merely the literary, a complete aesthetic experience was derived.⁷⁰ This approach declined with the onslaught of the Reformation, when the polemics of Catholic and Protestant required accurate knowledge of patristics; the enlisting of textual criticism and archival research to state one's own religious position was the ancestor of the modern 'scientific' approach posited by von Ranke.⁷¹ However, it was the Enlightenment which would bring the older mode of history to its peak.

Vitality, History would continue to be classed as a branch of rhetoric through the Renaissance, as offered by the Jesuits.⁷² The implication of such a classification was that history was based around the ability to convince and to dazzle: instead of an objective withdrawal, its aim was to engage with passion. The fundamental question is whether this discourse is a valid one. We may currently look

⁶⁹ F. Heer, *The Medieval World* (George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1961), 227

⁷⁰ James Dennistoun (ed., trans.), *Memoirs of the Dukes of Urbino, illustrating the Arms, Arts, and Literature of Italy, from 1440 1630, Volume 2*, (London, Longman, 1859), 81

⁷¹ O. Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Victoria, Penguin, 1964), 304

⁷² Heer, 227

askance at the ‘religious-political *schwärmerei* and soothsaying’ as Heer describes the medieval trend. If shifted to a secular framework, it may be considered an activist rhetoric, which rather than merely describing the past endeavours to draw lessons from it for a contemporary audience. This is, without a doubt, the reason for which such a history is often read: a purpose is sought by the reader, a motivation behind the reading of facts. Entertainment too is often sought, and the reading experience blends these two forms of textual stimulation.

2: *The Entrenchment of Narrative History*

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) and Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) took the polemical history of the pre-scholarly era and elevated it into new levels. Both men had a specific enemy in mind: Gibbon, in the mode of Tacitus, blamed stereotyped inhabitants of the Eastern Empire and autocracy for the decline of Rome, as well as the ascent of the Church, which sapped the martial vigour of the Romans.⁷³ Macaulay, while trying to survey the entire body of English history, tried to argue his thesis that ‘history is a process of continual improvement’, citing James II and his Catholic despotism against the forces of Protestant democracy, led by Parliament and the (Dutch) William III.⁷⁴ In appealing to the contemporary issues of public life – the role of religion in society, or the basis of the constitutional order – both Gibbon and Macaulay were appealing to the informed lay reader, who formed the bedrock of the Enlightenment bourgeoisie: not trained in the science of history, but knowledgeable about its events. Their assumption was that history could make arguments for the present, so they made no attempt to hide their endeavours. Despite being a dense series of six volumes, Gibbon could claim that his work was on ‘every table, and nearly every toilette’.⁷⁵ Its

⁷³ E. Gibbon, H.R. Trevor-Roper (ed.), *the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Volume I* (London, Everyman, 1993), xci, 45, 545

⁷⁴ T. B. Macaulay, H.R. Trevor-Roper (ed.) *The History of England*, (London, Penguin, 1968), 52

⁷⁵ Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, p. 159-160

attitude was essentially different from the scholarly approach pioneered by von Ranke – that history should aim for complete objectivity, based on the utmost scholarly research, to simply tell ‘as it really was’. Both Gibbon and Macaulay would argue the accuracy of their work, but by Rankean standards they were activists. And yet their work was honoured as history by readers for generations to come. Winston Churchill read Gibbon and Macaulay in preparation for writing *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.⁷⁶ In noting the influence of both Gibbon and Macaulay on Schama and Ferguson, one can dispense with their political positions their without necessarily denying their ability to entertain and attempt to capture the mind of the reader. Both historians refer to these moralising histories in an approving tone; Ferguson speaks of Gibbon in referencing the future of a Muslim Europe,⁷⁷ while Schama mentions Macaulay both as a historical figure, and as a proving a vision of progress, a veritable religion.⁷⁸ However, what perhaps gave both of these figures attention is that their verve turned their histories into literary classics: bound and tooled copies of *The Decline and Fall*, as well as *The History of England*, adorned bookshelves just like Tacitus. They could combine polemic which endeared them to their readers, for whom education was an entertaining purpose.

3: *The Aesthetics of Documentary*

One might consider how documentary differs from written text as a medium from writing. First and foremost, it is visual: it works in images, rather than words, and deliberately appeals to the senses. It is, thus, a method of presentation, not of research. Of course, unlike Gibbon, much of what Schama and Ferguson presented was not their own research. But at other points, there is the representation of

⁷⁶ Christopher N. Phillips, ‘Review: *Liberal Epic: The Victorian Practice of History from Gibbon to Churchill*’ *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 67, no. 4, March 2013

⁷⁷ Ferguson, *The War of the World*

⁷⁸ Schama, *A History of Britain*

work which they undertook by themselves. In *The Power of Art*,⁷⁹ where he discusses Rembrandt, Schama returns to his old haunt of the Dutch Golden Age, and the arguments which he made in *The Embarrassment of Riches* are once again posited. This time, however, he has the opportunity of colour and music, the ability to create an atmosphere. In the next episode, discussing David, he is in the world of *Citizens*, and the horrors of the French Revolution are evoked far more effectively than in other works.⁸⁰ Focussing on *A History of Britain*, Justin Champion noted the highly sophisticated manner of conveying empathy through visual techniques: the reading of sources in the voices of people in local dialects, the intercutting of contemporary depictions with their re-enactments, all worked to transport the viewer to their period.⁸¹ All these methods surely work as an extension of an older mode of history, rhetorical devices which occupy the place formerly held by literary skill. In using modern methods, a pre-modern style of history is being excavated and shown.

Schama himself has affirmed this analysis. In one interview, he cited A.J.P. Taylor as an influence, who, even when filmed merely speaking, had the ‘incredibly powerful’ wit of ‘a natural storyteller’.⁸² He was adamant that this was a ‘subjective’, personal view, eschewing accusations of inaccuracy. Addressing the B.B.C., he defended his approach further, insistent on the value of narrative. Contrary to the academic wisdom that ‘serious television is a contradiction in terms’, Schama insisted on its value as a provider of narrative. ‘History is about telling stories’, he insisted, explicitly affirming the value of narrative. This was the alternative to an inward-looking analysis which tended to the ‘Brahmanical’. Such a methodology required immersion in the subject, and empathy. Narrative, he complained, was frequently ‘seen as only a philosophical issue’, rather than a means of ordering the

⁷⁹ Schama, *The Power of Art*, Episode 3

⁸⁰ Ibid. Episode 5

⁸¹ J. Champion, ‘Seeing the Past: Simon Schama’s *A History of Britain* and Public History’, University of London, 2001

⁸² Interview with Mark Larson, from *A History of Britain* (BBC, 2002)

past.⁸³ ‘We like to think...that we can order the course of events, and turn cacophony into listenable music’. The visual medium suited this in particular, in that its appeal to sense. Schama in particular discussed the use of animal imagery, discussed with the crew. Using footage of a hawk as a metaphor for Henry II, kingship was expressed in the contemporary medium of the medieval bestiary. Likewise, for Elizabeth I, the footage of a peacock, interspersed with the development of a ‘cult’ of the queen, expressing the pageantry of the Renaissance court. He also alluded to the role of music, where the composer for the series, John Harle, created a score rooted in liturgical chant and English folk music, slightly updated, to give a sense of the contemporary, the continuous flow from past to present. In trying to evoke a fundamental sense of the past, Schama reiterated Michelet’s dictum that ‘The job of history is to resurrect the dead’.⁸⁴

In the work of Ferguson, the same method as attempted, although, one must admit, although less so. It was at least attempting a far more brusque effect, to shock its viewers. For obvious purposes, the self-consciously aesthetic flow of images in *A History of Britain* was less appealing. Instead, for *The War of the World*, a more industrial mood occurs. There are occasional flights of fancy: focuses on the sartorial details of peoples of different races before they are to be murdered in genocide. In the first episode, the view of an Armenian priest censing an empty church shifts to the photos of murdered Armenian townsmen, evoking an eerie memory. In contrast, the music is far more jagged, imitating the sound of gunfire. The effect is an endless bombardment of the senses, intending to unsettle rather than sooth. Ferguson succeeds in creating an urgent message, but not an aesthetically appealing one. ‘I aim to be down and dirty rather than high and mighty’ he said in *Civilization*. ‘My idea of civilization is as much about sewerage pipes as it is about flying buttresses’.⁸⁵ The context for this is his criticism of

⁸³ Simon Schama, Inaugural BBC History Lecture, ‘Television and the Trouble with History’ (BBC, 2002)

⁸⁴ Simon Schama, *Tempus Fugit* (BBC, 2002)

⁸⁵ *Civilization*, 2

Kenneth Clark's documentary of the same name, with its treatment of civilisation as artefacts of high culture. Indeed, there is far more focus on industrial artefacts, and *Civilization* has a strong focus on industry. The implication is that by not focussing on the merely beautiful, Ferguson is being 'serious'. He reflects the post-Marxist view that the real forces of history lie in the anthill of everyday life of survival and sustenance, rather than the deeds of Great Men, and the odd Great Woman. However, the industrial footage might be deemed an aesthetic in its own right, creating an atmosphere of dynamism, rather than lyricism, but still intended to arouse the interest of the viewer. The result is a less immediately appealing sight, but the footage is subtly construed to impact on the viewer: a greater sense of interest. In these aspects, Ferguson's work has as much an aesthetic appeal as is that of Schama.

Conclusion: *The Epilogue of Popular Narrative*

Despite having a superficial modernity in their utilization of modern media and their own personalities, the works of Schama and Ferguson are something more than a product of the age of mass media. What is one to make of this? Such is what countless numbers see. What they see entertains, compels, yet surely leaves the strict objectives of what counts as 'history'. Richard J. Evans and Lawrence Stone deride it. Yet, whatever this thing is, it is something which, before the Rankean codification, was called 'history'.

Lawrence Stone's anxiety about 'narrative' and 'structural' history, discussed above, is the essence of the dispute, but they also show the problems with such a dichotomy. For a start, 'structural' history is comprised of several not necessarily compatible theories: narrative is not so much storming the fortress of structure as bypassing three warring forts. However, whatever one may think of it, this 'history' existed before Leopold von Ranke, who attempted to codify history as an academic discipline with scientific rigour, and make it something more than the pursuit of dilettantes. Beyond the

academy, an older form of history, a pre-scholarly form, re-emerges, clothed in the wizardry of mass media. But it has the same components: a definite sense of narrative, and a cause, whether polemical or didactic. Ferguson, on his musings of how immigration may affect Europe, excused himself from strict recounting. 'Of course, this is not the business of an historian, whose subject is supposed to be the past'. We have already seen Schama's ironic elegiac on history's confusion with nostalgia, and its place as a cultural bloodstream. Both see the past as explicit narrative, and although with a few misgivings, they return to narrative, whatever is discontents.

It has been described here how, in Schama and Ferguson, biases are created, and how these combined with the emerging mass media to reprise an older history. The question here is how narrative and analytical history might coexist within the academy, and the answer lies in considering the precise discontents of narrative. As we have seen, the primary criticism of narrative is that it 'emplots' a story which is not there, a discourse heavily explored by Hayden White. Yet narrative has veritable benefits. It gives relevance to a discourse, turning a mass of data into a time connected to the present, to the concerns of readers not yet introduced to the topic. Arthur Danto wrote on the epistemological implications of coherence which narrative lends to history: the very approach to events in chronological sequence imposes structure, making it intelligible to the mind.⁸⁶ This coherence is achieved by the pleasure derived from the humanity of the world being depicted. A story piques the interest of the lay reader, and from this world comes future interest, which then enters the academic world, and comes to terms with the full rigour of historical writing, shorn of its aesthetic ornamentation. The narrative may not necessarily exist, but it compels future discovery, and from there, the world beyond narrative becomes compelling in its own way.

It is a question of the essential praxis on which these two types of history work. The academic discipline after Ranke is, in a way, priestly. It keeps the rubrics and ensures that the rite is performed with exact precision, committed, and cautious, concerned about the ramblings of the prophet.

⁸⁶ A.C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985)

However, what both forms of history do share is a commitment to rendering the past, and from there, a solution may arise. The seasoned academic historian can combine both types; a commitment to factual accuracy, while resorting to narrative tropes in order to show how the topic of discussion is relevant to the wider world, makes sense, and arouses interest in the reader. Both Schama and Ferguson made early careers as structural historians and only slowly drifted through the narrative book to the full flight of documentary. Structure and narrative may be used together, not in opposition.

Does the story make the antithesis of history, the prophets make the priests? Therefore, the two forms of history ought to complement one another: the 'scientific' offering some bearing, and the 'narrative' giving meaning to history. In drawing upon objective research and emplotting it, the public historian brings a certain power to the field, showing the importance of past events to the lay reader. From there, they look further, to enter the Rankean world. It is by no means ideal, an *ad hoc* solution to a problem of ideals, but in the meantime, it works.

It was Friedrich Engels who said that history is 'the most cruel goddess of all'.⁸⁷ Yet when considering the widespread debates of her priests and her prophets, she is possibly also the most intriguing.

⁸⁷ F. Engels, tr. Donna Torr, *Correspondence*, February 24, 1893,

http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_02_24.htm Last accessed 27 June

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