

*The Evolution of History Within a Narrative by Simon Schama*

“Historians have always told stories. From Thucydides and Tacitus to Gibbon and Macaulay the composition of narrative in lively and elegant prose was always accounted their highest ambition. History was regarded as a branch of rhetoric.”<sup>1</sup> Simon Schama approaches the writing in his book *“Dead Certainties”* in an artistic style through a narrative of the evolution of history from the era of romanticism—classical heroic paintings of General Wolfe after the French and Indian War in 1763. This allegorical approach is merely a fictional style prose of the imagination that shed light on true events and the introduction to several historical processes that allow the reader to understand how the interpretation of histories evolved. By humanizing the characters in which we deem as heroes, through elegant portraits unconnected to resources or through place world settings in which contribute to geographical landscapes as a starting point to interpret these histories, Schama evokes imagination and facts to tell the great story. Schama also refers to Michel Foucault as he constructs in part two of the book, a narrative on institutions and prison—the propagation of power.<sup>2</sup> The author has found a way to insert the jewels of the historian and theorists through narration as way a way to discuss the polemical debates of the historical process and theory.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History* (Oxford, UK: Past and Present, 1979), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 100.

The introduction of General James Wolfe with a portrait sketched by George, frames the general in an elegant, artistic style that translates to the audience a man of great stature and valor. Why this may be true in a sense of passion and dedication to military services, the physical physique of the General was nothing of the sort. Only a soldier can tell you about the atrocities of the mental state during war and the toll it takes on the body as an active participant. Schama, in a rhetorical fashion detail how Wolfe was dying mentally and physically in this war. Furthermore, the author describes these moments in battle as if death (the true enemy) stood next to Wolfe on the frontlines throughout the story. Schama does this by stating the true enemy was his own body—“he had always been preoccupied by his physical frailty and had even been capable of dark banter on the subject...but now he thought, he was dying, withering away of gravel and consumption; a raging, scalding venom that ate at his guts.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to “death as the enemy,” Schama also paints through his words that Wolfe was indeed an esteemed General who planned his entire life to walk in the footsteps of his father. However, there was an insecurity, more like an imposter syndrome that haunted James Wolfe in his final battle—an interpretation often disregarded in historical process—the humanization of our heroes. This evidence is in the text as the author states, “Since he was a child, he had known nothing, nor expected anything, other than the army career in which his father had achieved some rank and modest renown...Wolfe had always hungered for such responsibility, but now it had

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Schama, 11-12.

come, it seemed more burden than an opportunity.”<sup>4</sup> The picture painted by Benjamin West “*The Death of the General*,” was critiqued by Sir Joshua Reynolds who was a painter, historian, and theorists—another man of great stature in his field of discourses, reports that the painting done by West, according to Schama, was an act of appalling vulgarity.<sup>5</sup> Reynolds posits in his objection to the painting that it robbed a history of great universal significance which ought to be embodied in the narrative and that West was violating the historical convention of empirical research—therefore rejected the idea of literalism and embraced rhetoric.<sup>6</sup>

Benjamin West was an American painter who became famous after his painting of General Wolfe and praised by the King. This method of rhetorical translation became a structure that was recycled by many painters because of its success and economic incentives. We see these structures today in music, television, and with many historians to date who often continue to transcribe from archives, only to tell the side of the victors, thus eliminating the true narrative of the loser. In this case, the humanization of the victor is left out and it became a structure that paid well to those artists that followed the artistic interpretation of West’s painting. Most impressive in Schama’s approach to telling this history, is the introduction of Francis Parkman—a historian from the Harvard Institute who introduces a place world setting to write history. Parkman traced the

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<sup>4</sup> Simon, Schama, 13-15.

<sup>5</sup> Simon, Schama, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Simon, Schama, 26-28.

geographical landscape to capture the essence of writing history—a space outside of the library and academia.

Parkman's style was quite unique, as he listened to secondary sources from the mouths of his nieces where he closed his eyes and imagined the spaces in which the writings described. Schama describes this technique as the true “labour and ordeals from Parkman's Puritan forefathers,” stating that “what the historian sought to find what was not in the archives or in the library but awaited him in the landscape itself.”<sup>7</sup> This is where Schama introduces the historical process of studying the geographical landscape, the evolution of the process to discover spaces beyond the academic institution—in this case, Harvard.<sup>8</sup> Parkman's journey took a physical toll on him as did with General Wolfe during the French and Indian War. It was this significance the historian found himself emersed in the same journey of Wolfe, and his writings reflected his efforts—thus telling the story from a rhetorical education of what soldiers went through on the battlefield, “in his wanderings he fell from sheer cliff paths; sank to his chest in swamp; and pitched by clouds of ravenous blackfly...his body began to record these histories in scars, dislocations, dull muscular aches that in later life would cripple his legs and arms.”<sup>9</sup>

As complicated as one could imagine, the author jumps from one place to another, wielding his pen in various aspects of academia. Though one could get bogged down in the details of this

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<sup>7</sup> Simon, Schama, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Simon, Schama, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Simon, Schama, 51.

narrative, it would behoove the reader to dig deeper into what Schama is presenting in his work. Part two complicates the story as the previous chapter ends with the death of General Wolfe, departs from Francis Parkman, picks up with Dr. George Parkman, and enters in this world of murder, medicine, and institutions for the disorderly. One may find this to be a segue into the institution of slavery and the ill acts of emancipation, with the mentioning of John Quincy Adams and his death during the great debates over emancipation.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, though this chapter in part two deals with the debate over Dr. George Parkman's accused killer Dr. John Webster, it does not hurt to mention the line, that makes mention that slavery was alive and well when Schama states, "nor could he forget the poor negro slave seated at the foot of a mast on the Alexandria steamer, his wet, black face brilliantly illuminated as a bolt of lightning struck him and the big ship plowed on through the boiling waters to the dock."<sup>11</sup>

This unique approach that Schama references—as an assertion of “freeing them,” meaning those who were in shackles as an act of nobility, make way for theorist, Michel Foucault who believed that prisons were considered institutions of power. Furthermore, the quote that follows—“Coulton wheeled himself from the scene, and Pinel passed among the demented like an apostle armed with holy power,” add value in the interpretation that the demented are indeed overpowered by an overseer. In addition, these notions of the demented could very well be slaves or anyone who

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<sup>10</sup> Simon, Schama, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Simon, Schama, 86.

went against normalities such as a woman who could not find a husband or a man who had financial issues. In a line stating according to the author, “they imagined one room of Bicêtre, with its smells of terror and piss, the insane manacled to walls along with the most desperate criminals,” Desperate criminals? One may think of slavery, possibly those fresh off the ships during the slave trade or illegal smuggling of slaves. And while it may be true that the “insane and mentally challenged people were in this detention center or mental hospital; from 1800-1865, the Underground Railroad changed the landscape of a nation that criminalized abolitionists and slaves alike producing legislation and laws that cornered the first civil rights movement, and later with the “Slave Fugitive Act” of 1850. This may be a stretch in connecting the two, however, the experimentation of bodies and the idea of “marriage of science and humanity”<sup>12</sup> is not far off from what historians have discovered about the experiments of black bodies in relation to science and medicine.

Again, one can get bogged down in the details, but what exactly is Schama doing here? In part two, these references of slavery, murder, institutions, and science in the previous paragraphs are a part of the narrative for a reason, but what is the meaning of Schama’s narration? The introduction of Dr. George Parkman and his death, the search for the truth, are the processes required to solve a mystery, a murder. Is history the victim? Is history Dr. George Parkman? These are the processes that solve the murder—comb through the evidence (sources), develop an interpretation from the facts and witnesses by which are the common methods in finding out the

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Schama, 98.

truth. Is this the historical process? Toward the end of chapter two, in part two, Francis Parkman arrives again in the story, so does slavery, murder and a mystery that must be solved—in addition to the janitor, Ephraim Littlefield who is presumed to assist in the search for answers. From classical paintings from the era of Romanticism to geographical landscapes, and later floor plans of the basement, the medical college at Harvard, and the hole dug in the basement by Mr. Littlefield, it began to resemble the “*Historical Representations of Truthfulness*,” in chapter three of Berkhofer, in which the past represents Harvard Medical College, the text—Mr. Littlefield story, and the source—the basement.<sup>13</sup>

History before had very little resources to find the truth. The process was not driven by empirical research. It was orchestrated through narratives, something of an oral history and romanticized picturesque paintings. Schama does well describing this with General Wolfe and the many paintings that followed Benjamin West. As we move throughout the years, history becomes more complicated. People on the ground began to demand more. The complicated story of Dr. George Parkman and the need to solve a murder is evidence that the world has evolved, research evolved, investigation evolved, history and interpretation evolved. While the narrative of “*Dead Certainties*” tends to be a distraction and at the same time entertaining, the process of life, the human trials and tribulations are at the forefront, and not at the mercy of a King. Due process and

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<sup>13</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 65.

justice are under the auspices of the law and its interpretation of who is innocent and who is not. Is history and law not one in the same? Do historians not investigate before writing? Are lawyers caught up in the great story or is evidence more important than the narrative? One may say both are in concert with one another. Whether or not Dr. George Parkman is guilty or innocent, you must have research, facts, evidence, and interpretation to seek the truth—and if the truth comes out, how will it be presented to the public? Will it be silenced and suppressed in the archives or will it be dehumanized or less volatile to save face for such a great man of stature and valor—for Dr. Parkman was indeed a man of importance for his generation and the institution of Harvard. The truth of the past is something we will never truly know because we were not there.