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The Misuse of Power

Tracy Krueger

The discipline of history is now undergoing a struggle; the existence of historical fact is being threatened by relativism. Some historians would pull the science of history into the realm of literature while ignoring what should be an all too sacred boundary between fact and fiction. Among these insidious practitioners is Simon Schama, whose recent publication Dead Certainties has created a firestorm of controversy over this very topic. Gordon S. Wood correctly assesses this work as illegitimate and dangerous.

In reaching this conclusion, it must first be established that there is in fact a difference between historical fact and inventive fiction. Historical facts are real. It may be difficult to arrive at their truth, and many historical events may be ambiguous, but it is possible to chronicle history. Fiction, conversely, is pure invention, by definition having no basis in reality, and concordantly no place in history. While interviewing on the public service production "Bookmark", Schama himself asserts that once a historian begins to invent, he ceases to write history. He is completely correct.

But Schama is guilty of merging the line between fact and fiction. IN Dead Certainties, Marshal Tukeys' conversation with Ephraim Littlefield in Part two is one of many "pure inventions". (Schama, p.322) One line from a soldier's fictitious account of General Wolfe in Part one asserts that "his driven, febrile personality, swinging between tender compassion and angry vanity, was haunted by Night Thoughts, by ravens perched on tombstones." (Schama, p.18) Can the historian really know what a soldier thought was going on in General Wolfe's head unless there is a real document to support that claim? Schama, instead of basing this on an actual document, would rather introduce his own ideas and fantasies about General Wolfe. Historians might enjoy embellishing historical figures with heroic characteristics, but unless there is a basis in actuality to make that claim, the work is not history. It is unacceptable to sacrifice the historical truth of the matter for a poetic truth. Beauty does not supersede reality.

It is particularly contemptible to begin inventing in the midst of real history, for then readers have no way of knowing what is invented and

what is not; they are forced to guess. Schama tells us in his "Note on Sources" that "this is a work of imagination that chronicles historical events.: (Schama, p. 327) He later admits that two passages of *Dead Certainties* are purely fictional. In doing this, he implies that the rest is at least partially factual. How can the reader know which portion of the work is true and which isn't? For instance, can one know if the footnote on page 79 about Josiah Quincy, Sr. is real? It is not included in Schama's list of "purely imaginative" novellas, so some degree of truth must be present. The tendency of the layman will be to accept, and this invests far too much power in the hands of historians to significantly alter or embellish the past through invention.

Supporters of Schama would undoubtedly defend him by pointing to the subtitle, "Unwarranted Speculations". Schama himself writes that many of the passages are in fact "historical novellas". However, he never once, either in *Dead Certainties'* afterword or his interview on "Bookmark", concedes that this work is not a history; he merely admits the inclusion of historical novellas. It is in fact considered to be more. Lewis Lapham, his interviewer on "Bookmark", thought that *Dead Certainties* was a history book. Gordon Wood agrees, writing that "Schama seems to believe that he is doing something more than writing historical fiction . . ." (Wood p. 15) Schama refers to himself as a "historian", not as an "author". *Dead Certainties* has the perception of being much more than a simple fictional work.

Having established a difference between fiction and fact, and Schama's ignorance of that boundary, one must ask if this is dangerous to the practice of history. Yes, it is. History is first and foremost a science: the science of arriving at some historical truth. Barbara Tuchman adroitly emphasizes this by saying that "what his imagination is to the poet, facts are to the historian". (Tuchman, p.32) Facts may be ambiguous. So too might the "historical truth" be an ambiguous one, but then it is necessary to let the truth lie in the ambiguity of the events. Schama could have organized *Dead Certainties* along these lines, avoiding inventing stories, and presented what would have been a legitimate, artistic history. Schama's belief that "If in the end we must be satisfied with noting more than broken lines of communication to the past . . . [this] perhaps is still enough to [go with]" (Schama, p. 325-6) is legitimate. Yet Schama must playfully go one step beyond this axiom by adding fiction. It is lamentable that he cannot follow his own advice. He does not leave the ambiguity of the situation rest in the conflicting historical evidence surrounding Wolfe's character and Parkman's murder; he instead resorts to a fathering a bastard fact/ fiction mutt.

This work is also dangerous in that it opens the door to a broader range of "creative history". Gordon Wood's worries about the impact of *Dead Certainties* are warranted. (Wood, p. 12) If a significant Harvard

historian writes an accepted blend of fact and fiction, the possibility exists that another, less talented "historian" might widen it. He might, for instance, use Schama's technique of writing an entire history in the first person. This is acceptable if he does not deviate from the facts, but then this writer might also neglect to document his work. He might further add a few of his personal insights and ideas about what it might have been like during the period he is writing about. He might even write an entire book by reading a number of historical documents and synthesizing them into one work creatively. (As Schama did in writing the soldier's account of the battle of Quebec in Part One.) This threatens historical truth by giving the imagination free reign; the last possibility mentioned is clearly not historical, but it could equally clearly be construed as acceptable, if dead certainties is considered legitimate. It is acceptable to write a work in this fashion; it is not acceptable to claim that the work is anything more than historical fiction. But that is what the renowned Simon Schama has done in publishing *Dead Certainties*. When the preeminent historian of the twentieth century deems something acceptable (and in this case, gives birth to it), his voice will undoubtedly and unfortunately be heard.

Gordon Wood contends that "[Schama's] violation of the conventions of history writing actually puts the integrity of the discipline of history at risk." he is absolutely correct in that contention. History is a science, not an art. Artistic modes may be applied to enhance a factually based narrative, but once a writer ignores the facts in any portion of a historical work, he throws a cloud of uncertainty over a work that should no longer be considered a history. Rather, it is a dangerous exercise in creative writing, a contemptible misuse of a historian's power, and a violation of the sacred stewardship of the past that is both the historian's most cherished treasure and his greatest responsibility.