

On Wednesday 8th December 2010, The Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past (IPUP), at the University of York, held a major one-day conference that examined the genesis, legacy, and impact of Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*, marking ten years since it was first broadcast on the BBC. A massive undertaking on the part of the huge and talented team behind its creation, *a History of Britain* was a landmark series that showcased intelligent writing, outstanding photography, and innovative filmed recreations of the past. A massive critical and commercial success, the time was now apposite to reflect and look back not only at the series itself, but how it had sustained a powerful influence over the subsequent decade's-worth of television history.

The conference began with an opening address by the Director of IPUP, Professor Helen Weinstein, welcoming the speakers and conference delegates to the University of York, and in particular, to the newly opened Berrick Saul Building in which the conference was being held. Weinstein described how the conference was sited within a larger research agenda currently underway at IPUP, exploring the means by which narratives about the past are told and retold by the media, and studying how those histories go on to shape community and national identities in the contemporary world.

The second paper was given by Greg Dyke, currently Chancellor of the University of York, but who was, at the time the series was first broadcast, Director General of the BBC. Dyke said that he feared he could take little credit for the series itself, as it had been commissioned long before he arrived in post in 1999, but that he was a year into his role by the time the first series was aired in late 2000. It was, he reflected, a particular favourite of his, because it was so closely aligned with traditional Reithian values, and as such, it informed, educated, and entertained. In particular, he considered Schama himself to be a great presenter, succeeding in the series by virtue of his gifts in making complex ideas understandable to a wide audience. Overall, by combining a great storytelling instinct with the stylish visual look chosen by the producers and directors, the series was a triumph for both its makers and the BBC. Dyke also recalled that he himself learned a great deal from watching it, not least the enormously important role that the conflicts over religion had played in British history, a fact that can sometimes seem distant in our contemporary secular world. Ultimately, the real and enduring greatness of the series rested in the fact that it made its knowledge and narrative accessible for all audiences.

Following Greg Dyke's paper, Helen Weinstein held a Q&A session with Janice Hadlow, currently Controller of BBC Two, but who was the original series producer of *A History of Britain*. Hadlow recalled that the very first time she had ever heard of *A History of Britain* was when she came across an announcement in the industry magazine *Broadcast* in 1995, which detailed how the then-Controller of BBC Two Michael Jackson was publicising a projected series on the history of Britain. Drawn immediately to the project, she recalled that she was absolutely determined to be involved with it. Speaking about the founding principles that lay behind the process of the series' creation, she spoke of two overarching main aims: that the series demonstrate a healthy emphasis on the importance of chronology ('joining things up'), and that secondly, by doing so, it would be capable of transmitting complex ideas in an accessible manner. Thus, each individual episode would be a part of a longer and broader continuity, but they would also be stand-alone programmes that would tell the viewer why one particular moment or era was so significant in the wider span of British history. Reflecting on adapting certain of the initial plans to meet changing circumstances, Hadlow also recalled paring down the series from twenty-five episodes to fifteen due to budgetary constraints, whilst yet ensuring that there remained a coherent structure and chronological framework to allow for the complex narrative to be fully realised, with no loss of ideas-driven complexity. Inevitably, this meant some compromises about what was to be shown (including the loss of *The Wars of the Roses*), but ultimately she was able to reflect upon a partitioning

of British history into individual episodes that worked very well. She also emphasised that there was a clear commitment on the part of the programme-makers to include contemporary testimony wherever possible to illustrate and illuminate the stories being retold. One of the results of this approach was that it made the history accessible for a very wide audience, by speaking about big historical themes through the voices of individuals from the past. In terms of the pragmatic application of these ideals, Hadlow also recalled how decisions were taken to deliver this vision through the choice of one individual authorial presenter to carry the series' narrative voice through the episodes (which was quite an unfashionable decision at the time, and led to a degree of institutional scepticism about the viability of the project). By freeing themselves from the fear that they were being called upon to provide a definitive history, the production team became more confident not only about the programme they were making, but also about the role they envisaged being taken by that presenter and narrator: they knew that they would have to find someone with the chutzpah to stand up and author episodes concerning whole swathes of history about which they were not necessarily expert, and in doing so, potentially face the opprobrium of professional colleagues. Simon Schama was an obvious choice: Hadlow had worked with him on *The Late Show*, and knew that not only did he have a wide-ranging palette of interests, but he was also an excellent writer and communicator. In conclusion, Hadlow told the audience that she had ultimately chosen to pursue a vocation in television with a desire to make knowledge attractive to the widest possible audience, and this was an ideal that lay behind *A History of Britain*, in so far as it sought to engage audiences with an historical story that was absolutely key to the shared national present. Although perhaps now at times slightly dated, the lesson of the series for producers and commissioners is that it stands as an exemplar, expressing the idea that complex ideas about the past are too important, too central to the now, not to find accessible and widespread popular dissemination. The very best history programmes currently on the BBC are there because *A History of Britain* gave producers and commissioners the confidence that good, authored, and complex history programmes can find a place in the schedules and become critical and popular successes. Indeed, there is a diverse and richly varied range of history programming on the BBC at the moment, much of which reaches out to different audiences with discrete tastes and preferences.

The next paper was given by Simon Schama himself, allowing him to reflect on his role in writing and presenting the series. He began by saying that one of the main attractions for him at the outset of his involvement in the series had been that *A History of Britain* seemed very much to embody precisely those Reithian values that Greg Dyke had earlier identified: that this was a series that could inform, educate, and entertain, all at the same time (and, Schama suggested, this was very much in the spirit of a tradition of history going back from J.H. Plumb, to Macaulay, and even as far back as Tacitus). There was in the series very much an unapologetic return to the kind of history that joined up the past to the present, and wilfully gave the audience a narrative chronological sweep. True, this type of history had been out of fashion at times over the course of the twentieth century, but still there was something absolutely crucial in attempting to make sense of the present through its connections to the past. Schama remembered when Janice Hadlow had been in the midst of trying to persuade him to take on the role of writer and presenter; after initially pleading that he was no expert in many of the periods, he had come to realise that this might well turn out to be in the series' favour: that a restraint and a diligence prompted by comparative lack of immersion in any one era may ultimately create better episodes. Then, calling to mind R.G. Collingwood's writings in *The Idea of History*, he reminded the audience that the role of the historian is not merely to be an anthologist of events, but rather, they must intellectually re-enact in their minds all

that has gone before, to enter into the past in so far as it is possible, in order to better make sense of it in the present. Thus, one of the key ideas behind the series was this notion of ‘joining things up’, articulated in two ways: joining the past to the present, and marrying the great events of the past with the lives of ordinary individuals. He also emphasised that he had always wanted the series to be replete with powerful images (although always carefully contextualised and given a full and proper reading that would allow their complexity to breathe), and one that also paid heed to the importance of art and imagery in the (frequently illiterate) past. He admitted that he had at first struggled to come to terms with the limits imposed upon a scriptwriter for television, being forced into some stark trimming of his first attempts at episode scripts, at the same time always seeking to be curious about the visuals and the directing of the episode and remaining in constant discussion about the nature of the shots that might be chosen. Giving an example of this, Schama discussed Episode 7: *The Body of the Queen*, recalling how instrumental the motif of not only the body (exemplified not just in the battle of wills and of fertility between Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots, but also in the relationship between Elizabeth’s own female body and the body politic), but also the image of the ring, wedding the Queen to her realm, a shot that both began and ended the episode. Giving a further example of the centrality of the image, Schama also spoke of the need to historicise imagery in order to better understand the role that it played in the minds and the eyes of those who saw them at the time they were produced. As an example, Schama showed firstly a clip from the episode that focussed upon the Reformation, *Burning Convictions*, because it not only explored the importance of images in British churches, but also the battles to subdue them, and in doing so, related to the audience something of a world that has been lost forever. He then showed a clip from Episode 2: *Conquest!*, which powerfully combined image and text by showing the viewer a scene from the Bayeux Tapestry depicting a woman and child fleeing from a burning house, whilst the narration explained that this was the first image of civilian casualties of war in the Western canon, a resonant and powerful icon of suffering that was to reverberate through the ages. Schama then moved on to explain that he had been much occupied with the desire to bring a sense of immediacy to the narration (shades, again, of Collingwood), to move away from grandiose statements towards a sense of camaraderie with the viewer (without sounding too cravenly blokeish): to be an interlocutor, straddling the past and the present and speaking the intimate language of both. To achieve this, on occasion he and the director used unscripted to-camera pieces, where Schama would speak off-the-cuff, giving the narration a vibrant sense of the immediate (and here he showed a moment when this took place, in Episode 3: *Dynasty*). Concluding with two clips covering the Civil War and its bloody aftermath, Schama spoke about how difficult a challenge it is for history on television to communicate packages of complex ideas, especially when very many of them may be couched in some level of religious fervour that seems utterly alien to preoccupations of contemporary society. Overcoming this can be particularly difficult, and only achieved through the careful marshalling of visual themes and images that can give an immediacy to notions that might otherwise remain abstract. Fundamentally, it remained a central tenet behind all the episodes’ writing and direction that much of what was put on screen be ‘emptied out’ for the viewer; less was always more, and the viewer was always invited to collaborate with the film-makers, to find their own ways of taking the visual cues and scripted suggestions and take them on in their own minds, completing the stories themselves.

The next session of the conference was a panel with three of the major behind-the-camera figures speaking about their own involvement in the series: Martin Davidson, Executive Producer of the series; Clare Beavan, Producer and Director of Episodes 3, 7, and 15; and Jamie Muir, Producer and Director of Episodes 12 and 14. Beavan spoke

about her experiences of creating a visual ‘look’ for the episodes she directed, seeking always to accompany the history and its narrative with an identifiable atmosphere that would provide an immersive hook for the viewer, drawing and sustaining the audience’s interest. Giving the example of Episode 3: *Dynasty*, which told the story of the Angevins, the thematic visual conceit chosen here was heraldic animals, and in particular birds of prey, emblematically representing the Plantagenet family in their rule. These images were mixed with authentic period settings in churches dating from the era, heightening the drama and enhancing the visual complexity of the episode. Beaven also agreed with Schama’s ‘less is more’ summary, emphasising that frequently allusions and glimpses are often more powerful for the viewer than grandiose shots and costumes: a restrained retelling of a story, sited and shot simply can relate the narrative effectively, and without bombast. Martin Davidson began by telling the audience that one of the things that had struck him when watching clips of the series back again was how very different the episodes look from the kinds of history programmes on television today: in *A History of Britain* the images have often been degraded in contrast to today’s reliance on hyper-real HD; instead of *Britain*’s slow and steady pace, today audiences are often treated to much quicker, kinetic, cutting and intercutting; and gentler uses of score and sound-effects have now been replaced by more emphatic and hyper-real uses of sound. All of this gives the viewer of *A History of Britain* time to think, and time to digest all that they are seeing. Indeed, the visual lexicon and grammar deployed by the series was so influential, that for the next five years numerous programmes sought to imitate many of its individual and distinctive shots: ravens flying from wintry trees, clouds crossing the skies, cannon mouths, and so on. Davidson also spoke up for a sensibility at work behind the series, an avoidance of jingoism and a resultant muscular sadness in many of the stories, that articulated how troubled and troubling much of history is and was, a sobriety that is transmitted in both the narrative and the visuals. And here, he suggested, is a lesson not learned by those who have sought to imitate or emulate the series: many have tried to take the visual language of the series and imbue it with more energy, more pace, more pizzazz, but have ultimately been found wanting by failing to realise that the real backbone was the script and visuals chosen to match. Jamie Muir spoke chiefly about the visual re-enactments he deployed in the episodes under his charge. Influenced by Peter Watkins’ *Culloden* and Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo’s *Winstanley* and *It Happened Here*, as well as a desire to avoid any potential absurdities of anachronism and all-too-evident stick-on beards, Muir explained how he used a number of tactics. One was the use of Super-8, which as well as hiding or obscuring potentially telling anachronistic details, also endowed something of a sense of the visceral and immediate, giving the sense almost of a newsreel. Ensuring that none of the re-enactors filmed in their sequences ever actually spoke lines, he produced a series of tableaux that endowed the narrative with a feeling of the past happening in the present.

The next two papers were given by academics, commenting on the identity and the context of the series. The first was Adam Gutteridge, a Research Fellow at IPUP. He spoke about the series’ sense of topography, in terms of its articulation of both temporal as well as spatial landscapes, and how they were linked to its expressions of identity. Gutteridge argued that in its decisive commitment to location shooting, evident right through the entire series, *A History of Britain* drilled into the collective memory of its audience who had doubtless visited the famous heritage sites of Britain and augmented the series’ visuals with their own recollections. He also drew attention to the frequent deployment of ruined buildings, and the way in which the directors eschewed glimpses of the contemporary world in telling their stories, arguing that there was a temporal fluidity to many of the scenes, which was used to suggest to the viewer that there was a great proximity between present and past. Andrew Higson, the Greg Dyke Professor of Film

and Television Studies at the university's Department of Film, Theatre, and Television, spoke next on the relationships between heritage and media in the Britain of the millennium. Higson argued that there is a complex web of inter-relationships between representations of the past in media (both film and television) and the broader heritage industry itself, and this network frequently produces statements about the meanings of national identity. In the years either side of the production of *A History of Britain* there was a multiplicity of films that told and retold aspects of Britain's national past, such as *Elizabeth* and *Shakespeare in Love*: this was undoubtedly a moment when there was a great appetite for explorations of the shared British past, and the series should be seen in its much wider context. It was also a period of increasing awareness that history could be an engine that might be used to drive visitors towards Britain, through the commercial attractiveness of its heritage landscape, and those media representations played a strong part in this. Ultimately, Higson argued, it helps us better understand any articulation of national history if when we seek to view it we place it more firmly in the wider contexts in which it was produced.

The final session of the conference was a Q&A held between Helen Weinstein and George Entwistle, who is currently the BBC's Controller of Knowledge Commissioning. Entwistle was asked about the legacy and impact of *A History of Britain*, and he began by noting that all of this season's BBC history programmes (and here he echoed an earlier remark made by Janice Hadlow, that the BBC's schedule is currently brim-full of high-quality history) had been commissioned by Hadlow and Martin Davidson who cut their teeth on *A History of Britain*, and thus it has had a very concrete practical legacy over the last ten years. He continued by saying that over the last few years there has been an institutional return to a commitment to the quality of content (rather than a concentration on the visuals) and a primacy of ideas, which he sees very much as a lesson which has *A History of Britain* as its exemplar. Entwistle argued that although history on television should entertain, it should never be merely entertainment. Giving the example of this year's season focussing on The Battle of Britain, he spoke about how history programming (and scheduling) is able to use different formats to reach out to different audiences, across all of the BBC's channels. Thus, a season that examines one particular historical event or era might use celebrity-led history on BBC One, a drama-documentary on BBC Two, and then other presenter-led authored history programmes on BBC Four perhaps, accessing a wide range of viewers based on the nature of format deployed. He also spoke about the current success of immersive history series (*Edwardian Farm* and *Turn Back Time: the High Street* are both audience successes at the moment) as a means of reaching audiences that might think that they wouldn't necessarily be interested in history. He did re-emphasise, however, that no matter which of the particular formats are being used, content remains king overall: without the high-quality central idea, then a programme simply won't work. He concluded with some words about the future joined-up multiplatform world of television, where the increased availability of programmes for purchase online will lead to a better and deeper institutional memory, and may ultimately lead to a situation in which the entire BBC History archive is available for viewer access via IPTV.

The conference ended with a final summation from Simon Schama, who spoke warmly about the opportunity to reflect on the great richness of the day's shared learning, and endorsed the views of both Janice Hadlow and George Entwistle that a concern over the quality of content ought to be central in making television history.