

Graduation 2006 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Simon Schama CBE
Orator: Professor Hugh Brogan

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon SIMON SCHAMA

Nobody in his right mind would deny that our University is in Essex, but it will always be necessary to demonstrate, if we can, that it is indeed the University of Essex. So it is more than a happy coincidence that today's two honorary graduands are sons of the shire. Not that either Sir John Tusa, this morning's hero, or Professor Simon Schama were born here, any more than most of us in this theatre; but both were marked by formative years passed in Essex, on the north shore of the Thames estuary; and that fact, given their own great public distinction, is reason enough for incorporating them into our fellowship. I will go further: we need more them more than they need us, and I know that I speak for everyone here when I say that we welcome them warmly and gratefully.

It so happens that both of them came from immigrant stock: Sir John, indeed, was born in Czechoslovakia, as it then was. Simon Schama was born in London; but his paternal grandparents were Jews from Tzmir (or Smyran) in what is now Turkey; his maternal grandparents come from Lithuania. Both Tusas and Schamas made themselves at home in Essex, and I like to think that in recruiting so many overseas students the University is acting in one of the county's best traditions. It seems to have been in Essex that Simon Schama first fell in love with history: he was fascinated by Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, even though that's about Sussex, which stimulated his imagination so that in his mind's eye the mouth of the Thames was once more crowded with all the sea-traffic which once upon a time ploughed its waters: Roman galleys and longships of the North, galliots, caravels and tea-clippers. I am bound to add, however, that his published recollections of Southend and Leigh-on-Sea are not free of irony. "The pier," he says, "was strung with coloured lights and loud with the blare of band music, crackingly amplified over the black water. The promenades were littered with limp, vinegar-saturated chips and you could, literally, get your teeth stuck into cylinders of Day-Glo pink rock candy, the letters bleeding as you gnawed optimistically through the stick." His evocation of the foreshore at Leigh is even more pungent:

"Beyond the sheds, grimy sand, littered with discarded mussel shells and hard strings of black-blistered seaweed, stretched down to the grey water. When the tide went out, exposing an expanse of rusty mud, I would walk for what seemed like miles from the shore, testing the depths of the ooze, paddling my feet among the scuttling crabs and winkles, and staring intensely at the exact point where, I imagined, the river met the sea."

All this comes from *Landscape and Memory*, one of Professor Schama's most remarkable books. I have not quoted it just to demonstrate that the historian was bred in Essex. The passage exemplifies several of his great virtues as a writer: not only is his past vivid in his memory, but through his poetic use of language and the precise details that he gives, he makes it vivid also to his readers. In a book about landscape it is important to be able to call up the human and natural scene, as he does here. More than that: literary skill, literary power, combined with inexhaustible energy and almost boundless ambition: these are the notes of Schama the historical writer; these are the traits which have shaped all his works, and characterise the professional achievement for which we honour him today.

But he is not only an historical author; he is a journalist, an art critic, a teacher. Thirty-five years ago or thereabouts, when he was very young, a good judge already found him to be one of the two best lecturers in the History Faculty of the University of Cambridge. His brilliance in that respect has also been experienced by many, perhaps most, of those present here. We all watched his extraordinary three-part television series on the history of Britain a few years ago, and are impatient for his return to the small screen this autumn, in a new series to be called *The Power of Art* which, I gather, is to be about how great works of painting and sculpture can be precipitated by moments of personal and historical crisis. I am sure that the programmes will be memorable. Nevertheless – I hope I am not just expressing elderly prejudices – in my opinion his best work is to be found in his many books. Not everybody will find time to read all of them (he is almost terrifyingly productive) but everybody with the slightest taste for history will enjoy some of them, and together they constitute what can only be described by the French word, *un oeuvre*. It is a glory of our age, which this afternoon it is my duty to demonstrate.

As I have already hinted, he is immensely various. He has written on the Netherlands during the French revolution; on Jewish history; on Dutch art in its golden age. He has written a chronicle of the French revolution, and plunged into environmental history; he has essayed American history; and of course he produced a three volume history of Britain to match his television programmes. All these works are marked by his keen intelligence, his eloquence, his sure judgement of human beings, and his almost incredible power of reading, digesting and exploiting sources and authorities. But there are other historians of whom much the same might be said (some of them work at the University of Essex). Where Simon Schama stands almost alone is in the sort of history that, with all his gifts, he chooses to write: a history defined not by its topics but by the historian's approach.

He has plausibly been compared to the great Macaulay, who famously wrote, when planning his *History of England*, that, "I shall not be satisfied unless I produce something which shall for a few days supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies." Even more plausibly, he might be compared to Macaulay's contemporary, Jules Michelet, who through his work gave the French not only their understanding of their nation's past, but much of their sense of identity. But the most useful comparison on the present occasion, I think, is with that national treasure, Sir David Attenborough (on whom, as it happens, we conferred an honorary degree about twenty years ago). I mean by this, not that they are both stars of television, but that they are the same sort of star. Watching or reading them (Sir David too is an author) we are charmed, entertained and instructed; there is never a trace of condescension, and we never feel that our teacher is talking above our heads. This is immensely good for our self-respect: it shows that we are cleverer than we thought; or at least, that if such men take trouble over our education, it is worth our while to take trouble too. So far as history is concerned, I really cannot overstate the importance of this service. Ever since the study and writing of the subject became an affair, first and foremost, of the universities, there has been a tendency for historians to talk only to each other, to write only for each other in often dreary learned journals, and to forget their duty to society at large (this tendency has been much stimulated by the appalling Research Assessment Exercise inflicted on us by government, which might have been designed to make the writing of great, or even good history impossible). Simon Schama is one of those who have led the resistance to this professional solipsism, this professorial careerism, by reviving narrative history – history as a tale told to the people – and doing it better than anyone else. His colleagues cannot find fault with his scholarship; writers cannot deny the power of his art; and readers who let themselves be carried away by his stories benefit enormously, whether as private souls or as citizens. And the result has been the extraordinary surge of interest in history which we see all around us. I dare not go so far as to say that Simon Schama is uniquely responsible for this revival, but I know that he has made an enormous contribution to it, and that is reason enough to offer him our degree.

That is all I really need to say. But I cannot end without urging you all to read Simon Schama's latest book, *Rough Crossings*. It illustrates all the points that I have made about this remarkable

historian. It is an epic tale, of the exodus of the African-American slaves who fled the American revolution and its slave-holding revolutionaries, at the risk of their lives, to seek liberty and pursue happiness under the promised protection of the British Crown. It tells how they fared in the quest for their promised land, first in Nova Scotia and then in Sierra Leone, and of their Moses, John Clarkson, an Englishman, who spent the last thirty years of his life in Essex, on the Thames estuary, at Purfleet. It performs what I, after a lifetime in the profession, have come to think is the historian's greatest task: it forces its readers to reconsider their ideas of justice and educates their conscience. It is deeply moving as well as instructive. At the risk of sounding like a publisher's tout, I will end by pointing out that it is available in all good bookshops and, I have no doubt, through the internet.

Chancellor, I present to you Professor SIMON SCHAMA