



Dead Certainties

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In *DEAD CERTAINTIES*, Simon Schama, the highly respected historian and author of the remarkable *CITIZENS: A CHRONICLE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION* (1989), takes on the task of describing how history is created. He begins with an examination of the death of the English General James Wolfe, who was killed in 1759 while fighting against the French forces near Quebec. In “The Many Deaths of General Wolfe,” Schama presents the general’s demise from various perspectives. The opening narrative is a fictionalized account told by an English soldier who participated in the battle. Also presented in this particular “historical novella,” as Schama labels it, is a narrative from the point of view of the young artist Benjamin West, who painted the strikingly colorful painting *THE DEATH OF GENERAL WOLFE* (1770), which invested Wolfe’s death with a tragic and heroic aura. The last narrative of this “novella” presents a powerful version of the story created by the historian Francis Parkman, whose close identification with Wolfe is apparent in his gripping book *MONTCALM AND WOLFE* (1884).

The second and larger “historical novella” of *DEAD CERTAINTIES* involves the retelling of the murder of Francis Parkman’s uncle, George Parkman, in 1849. The link between the two episodes is Francis Parkman. John Webster, a Harvard professor of chemistry, was tried and convicted for the murder of George Parkman. Webster had borrowed some money from Parkman and was unable to pay it back. In his “novella,” Schama employs a number of narrative elements to flesh out the complete story. Various participants in Webster’s eleven-day trial are allowed to speak, including the janitor at Harvard who discovered Parkman’s body parts a week after the murder was committed. Schama weaves fact and fiction together to create a telling mystery story. All the evidence points to Webster’s guilt, but Schama leaves the door open for reasonable minds to question the absolute certainty of his guilt. Schama makes the point that any historical certainty can be put in question, and that the student of history must consider how a historical perspective was created if he is to inch closer toward the truth. Some historians may argue with the validity of Schama’s point or method, but none can deny the power of his presentation in *DEAD CERTAINTIES*.

Sources for Further Study

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