

A History of Britain, Volume 3 – The Fate of Empire 1776-2000 by Simon Schama.

BBC 2002, £25.

This last volume of Simon Schama's monumental three part history of Britain covers, largely the events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arguably the most significant and eventful of the second millennium.

As always the text is eminently readable, highly engaging and sumptuously illustrated. Inevitably, with so much ground to cover and so many subjects within a large timeframe that are book-length topics in themselves, some events are paid greater attention than others. Equally, this volume is dominated by individuals, especially those of the Victorian era, Victoria and Albert, Disraeli and Gladstone, a sheaf of Indian army officers and native and British rulers in India, and the legacy of the British Empire. The last part of the book, and somewhat squeezed by the rest, is dominated by the strange but effective biographical combination of Winston Churchill and George Orwell (Eric Blair), expressing in many ways the societal tensions that dominated much of 20th century Britain.

Schama clearly feels, and in this reviewer's view is correct so to do, that we can only understand our present and plan for our future by truly comprehending our past. Schama's own contribution to that understanding is immense.

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