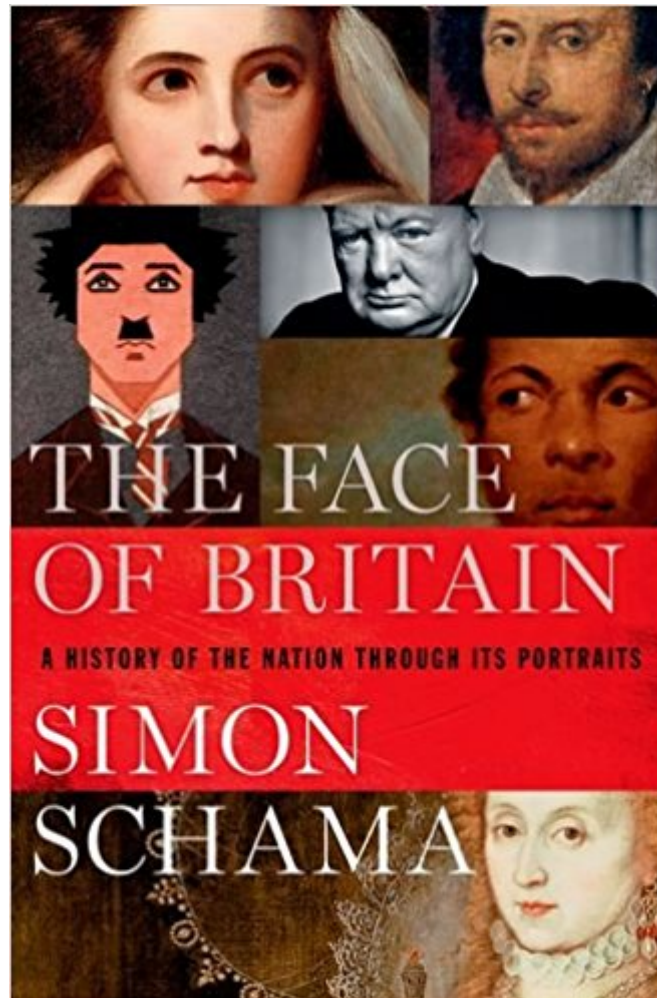


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The Face Of Britain: A History Of The Nation Through Its Portraits



Synopsis

Author of a number of celebrated works, including the bestselling *The Story of the Jews* and *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, Simon Schama's latest book fuses history and art to create a tour de force of narrative sweep and illuminating insight. Using images from works-paintings, photographs, lithographs, etchings, sketches-found in London's National Portrait Gallery, *The Face of Britain* weaves together an account of their composition, framed by their particular moment of creation, and in the process unveils a collective portrait of nation and its history. "Portraits," Schama writes, "have always been made with an eye to posterity." Commissioned to paint Winston Churchill in 1954, Graham Sutherland struggled with how to capture the "savior" of Great Britain honestly and humanely. Schama calls the portrait, initially damned, the "most powerful image of a Great Briton ever executed." Annie Leibovitz's photograph of a nude John Lennon kissing Yoko Ono, taken five hours before his murder, bears "a weight of poignancy she could not possibly have anticipated." Hans Holbein's preparatory sketch for a portrait of Henry VIII depicts "an unstoppable engine of dynastic generation." Here are expressions from across the centuries of normalcy and heroism, beauty and disfigurement, aristocracy and deprivation, the familiar and the obscure-the faces of courtesans, warriors, workers, activists, playwrights, the high and mighty as well as pub-crawlers. Linking them is Schama's vibrant exploration of how their connective power emerges from the dynamic between subject and artist, work and viewer, time and place. Schama's compelling analysis and impassioned evocation of these works create an unforgettable verbal mosaic that at once reveals and transforms the images he places before us. Lavishly illustrated and written with the storytelling brio that is Schama's trademark, *The Face of Britain* invites us to look at a nation's visual legacies and find its reflection.

Book Information

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[View larger](#) [View larger](#) [View larger](#) [Queen Elizabeth I](#) [Queen Elizabeth I](#), by unknown English artist, oil on panel, circa 1600. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 5175). Purchased, 1978. [Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha; Queen Victoria](#) [Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Queen Victoria](#), by John Jabez Edwin Mayall, hand-coloured albumen carte-de-visite, 1860. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG Ax46703). Purchased, 1966. [William Shakespeare](#) [William Shakespeare](#), associated with John Taylor, oil on canvas, circa 1610. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 1). Given by Francis Egerton, 1st Earl of Ellesmere, 1856.

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"...unfailingly amusing and intermittently risqué, delivered with smooth, slightly ironic panache."
-Foreign Affairs
"This splendid book by historian and art critic Simon Schama could hardly be better timed since it might plausibly be argued that 'the face of Britain' changed on or about June 23, 2016."
-Christopher Benfey, The New York Times Book Review
"He knows the history, the biography, and the art history... he made me look and learn. He is a great storyteller and we learn something new on every page."
-A. S. Byatt, New Statesman
"All of these lives rendered with an acuity of detail that could rival the best of portraitists ... describing Lawrence's portrait of Wilberforce, Schama calls the painting a work of 'transforming empathy.' That phrase could be true of his storytelling throughout this book."
-Ekow Eshun, The Independent
"Simon Schama's richly

illustrated history of Britain in portraits is a work of dazzling panache ... a book to devour." -John Carey, Sunday Times "Wonderfully compelling ... what this book, full of unhackneyed paintings and unfamiliar stories, shows is that when Schama is at his best he can see straight through people." -Michael Prodger, iThe Timesr "Rich in its variety of subjects ... poignantly memorable" -Martin Gayford, iTelegraphr "Some of the best writing on British portraiture I have read." -Bendor Grosvenor, iFinancial Timesr "He is both an inspired communicator of detail and context, an excitable and exciting critic and a sleeve-tugging gossip. The idea of portraiture is a perfect vehicle for his detailed imagination...the subjects of the portraits become uncannily alive." -Tim Adams, iThe Observerr "He has animated our portraits superlatively. One of our most in-demand public intellectuals has deftly ventriloquised his talking heads." -iEvening Standardr "Viewers of his TV shows know what a passionate presenter of his subject - art history - Simon Schama is. He button-holes your eye on his inward voyage of imagination. He does it as compulsively on the page as on screen ... I welcome back in this book history as people - people whose characters can be read in their fascinating faces." -iDaily Mailr "Schama's greatest gift is a sure eye for an extraordinary story...This isn't what you get from conventional historians or conventional art writers, more's the pity.... Schama has written books which will still be bought and talked about a century from now and he hasn't lost an ounce of zest or intelligence. Damn him." -Andrew Marr, iProspectr

Simon Schama is Professor of History and Art History at Columbia University and the author of many books, including *Rough Crossings*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction, and *The Embarrassment of Riches*. He is a Contributing Editor to the Financial Times for which he writes on politics and culture and has written and presented more than fifty documentaries for the BBC, PBS, and the History Channel, including *The Power of Art*, which won the 2007 International Emmy for Best Arts Programming.

Superb in every way. Even if you have not visited the National Portrait Gallery, this trip through it is as revelatory of history as it is of art. Th writing is an unadulterated joy in its elegance and its occasional straight from the hip colloquialisms. This is much more than a coffee table book; it is one that can be read and reread endlessly. A treasure

Schama's writing style is idiosyncratic, and neatly reflects the people of the portraits and their loves, tragedies, and complexities, with a distinctive quirkiness that can be droll, jazzy, sly, or sympathetic. He's never dry, always vivid, and not condescending. As an American, one not hugely familiar with

all aspects of British history, there were many new characters to meet, and to study in the future. The anecdotes about Winston Churchill are likely to be the most quotable, but the final chapter ("The Faceless of Britain") is devastating - the intertwined story of Private Water Ashworth, surgeon Harold Gillies, and artist Henry Tonks is unlikely to be forgotten by anyone who reads it.

Schama's books are rarely less than stimulating and always instructive. He uses portraiture, whether painted or photographed, as a basis for delving into British history. While some of the chapters are more interesting than others, as a whole, the book was worth every minute I spent reading it.

Good

Read the first chapter and was completely addicted

The National Portrait Gallery is a London museum near Trafalgar Square, which is home to thousands of portraits, with only a percentage on display at any one time. It's a wonderful place to visit, and in addition to the permanent displays of works of art, there are frequent special programs on individuals or groups important in British history. Author Simon Schama, in his new book, "The Face of Britain: A History of the Nation Through Its Portraits", is a wonderful look at selected works of art and he tells the stories of the people in the pictures. His are not conventional biographies, but rather short examinations of the influence of society on the subject and the influence by the subject on British society. Oh, and "portraits" can be done by paint, photography, or sculpture. All of the 35 or so sections are strong, but maybe the most interesting are the section on how photographer Yousef Karsh snapped his famous picture of Winston Churchill, glowering at the camera and the poor family of George III. Taken in Ottawa, Canada during a state visit in 1941, Churchill had just addressed the Canadian Parliament and was in no mood to have his picture taken. Karsh was in the ante-room with him and asked Churchill to put the cigar he was smoking in an ashtray. When Churchill wouldn't do it, Karsh marched over to the Prime Minister and snatched the cigar out of his mouth. The resulting picture of a mad Churchill became an iconic image of the man. Schama writes about George III and his son, the Prince of Wales, the future George IV. The prince, one of 15 children of George III and his wife, Charlotte, lived a dissolute life with mistresses and illegitimate children. Father and son, constantly at odds, are represented in the Portrait Gallery with a series of portraits. Another beautifully done section is titled "The Faceless of Britain". These were the Great

War soldiers hideously disfigured as a result of battle wounds. Schama writes how doctors and artists worked together to give these "faceless" some semblance of features. Taking one soldier, Private Walter Ashworth, Schama takes the reader through the surgeries needed to give this man a face and a future. Simon Schama's book is like a series of short stories about some of the lives behind the faces in the portraits. It's a marvelous book. I have the Kindle copy and while there are pictures with the text, there are some pictures written about that aren't shown. But I think they'd be available on the National Portrait Gallery's website.

I am an avid reader, (mostly non fiction), and have been for many years. I have read one other book by Mr. Schama, (The Power Of Art), and very much enjoyed it. I also enjoyed this book very much. I believe Mr. Schama writing skills, vocabulary, and story telling abilities are on another (higher) level. He is truly a master of his craft.

could be better dialog!

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