

SIMON
SCHAMA

author of The American Future: A History

scribble,
scribble,
scribble

WRITING ON POLITICS, ICE CREAM,
CHURCHILL, AND MY MOTHER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The American Future: A History

Scribble, Scribble, Scribble

*Writing on Politics,
Ice Cream, Churchill,
and My Mother*

SIMON SCHAMA



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*Another damned, thick, square book! Always scribble,
scribble, scribble! Eh! Mr Gibbon?*

The Duke of Gloucester to Edward Gibbon

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Introduction

I have two styles of writing, anal and loopy, both adopted in slavish but futile imitation of models who used a fountain pen as though they had been born with one in their hands. I had not. My primary-school exercise books, an Abstract Expressionist field of blots and stains, looked as though the nib had wet itself on to the page rather than been purposefully guided over the paper to form actual words. And yet I loved – and still do – the purchase the metal makes on paper, and can't begin a chapter or a script or a newspaper piece without first reaching for a fountain pen and notebook. I scribble, therefore I am.

At university I thought my bizarre handwriting – more or less the calligraphic equivalent of Tourette's Syndrome, disfigured by ejaculatory whiplashes above the line – ought to submit itself to a sterner form that might attest to my arrival at an Age of Reason. So I strove for a version of the professor's hand when he corrected my essays. This was a backward-leaning row of indentations and projections: a Cambridge minuscule. The letters rose, as if they were unsure about the worthwhileness of the effort involved, a bare millimetre from flat-line horizontal and had a tightness that I thought conveyed densely packed critical power. In the professorial hand the little ts and ds were barbs on a high-voltage wire and they snagged you with small, piercing lunges of pain. 'This paragraph five times as long as it needs to be,' the hand said, or 'Do you *ever* tire of adjectives?' My chastening superego, such as it was, reached for mastery of an economic style, but the unmannerly slob of id lurked to foul its plans. So my version of the professor's writing resembled the secretion of a crippled ant, one leg dragging behind the body as it crept from left to right across the page.

But this is still the hand I use, involuntarily, when correcting the work of my own students, or printed drafts of my own. Sometimes, the students beg me to decode a completely illegible set of comments, but I reckon that decipherment is part of their educational challenge. Hell, it did *me* no harm.

‘Do you know,’ chuckled the girlfriend from the 1970s, a queen of the nib, waving a page of my fractured minuscule – written, I blush to recall, in green ink – ‘I had *no* idea until you wrote me that note, that I was going out with a serial killer! Of course I could be wrong,’ she added, flashing me one of her fine-boned sardonic smiles, ‘you might just be a paranoid schizophrenic.’ It wasn’t her forensic diagnosis of my handwriting that stung, it was the merry way she laughed whenever she saw it, as if no one in their right mind could be expected to bother, except clinically. For our relationship to prosper, I realised I would have to make my hand lean in the opposite direction, with a degree of forwardness that testified to my ardour. On the other hand, it could not be a servile imitation of her own elegantly oblique manner, penned with long white fingers, for that would seem offputtingly craven, a bit like calligraphic cross-dressing. But wasn’t I the yid with the id?

So I just let it out of the kennel to see what it could do, and thus was born that wowser of a hand: loopy, big, brash, vauntingly cursive, and often entirely out of control. Loopy is to my writing what fox is to hedgehog, Tigger is to Eeyore, Bugs is to Elmer, Rabelais to Montaigne, Björk to Coldplay. Loopy bounds and leaps and lurches and can’t *wait* to get to the end of the line because – gee, gosh, boy oh boy – there’s *another* line to fill, and omigod, a whole half-*page* waiting just for me to do my thing all over it. Loopy will not be confined. Loopy’s hs snake skywards like a fly-fisher’s line, the tails of Loopy’s fs and gs and ys drop deep into the pond, Loopy frisks and gambols, Loopy jives, Loopy got da mojo, Loopy LIVES! And people – well, some people – tell me they can actually read it. Or so the nice ladies in the Burlington Arcade pretend when they watch me try out another antique Swan or Parker 51. Of course it could be in their interest to keep their smile of disbelief to themselves as Loopy goes for a test run on their scratch-pads, but they’re usually called Heather so, what the hell, I trust them. And the queen of the nib? Oh, she was tickled.

And so it has been – well before my encounter with, let’s call her *Italica* – that the call of Loopy moved me instinctively towards a

kind of writing that was driven by the pleasure principle, or at least danced to a different drummer than Carefully Considered Academic Analysis. That beat is called journalism and I have always, unapologetically, enjoyed committing it. Most of the pieces collected in this book were written for the many newspapers and magazines generous enough to indulge my habit and actually pay me for the exercise. (My first book review was for the venerable *Saturday Evening Post* and I got paid \$25.) A few of the lengthier, more spaciouly considered pieces – catalogue essays, the occasional lecture, book reviews – made the cut if they retained something of the nervous tingle of the moment, even if the high-wire act was performed in front of an audience rather than exacting editors and their readers. In some ways the title of this collection could not be less apt, for the joke of the Duke of Gloucester’s breezy enquiry at what Gibbon might be up to is comical only when one registers the pains and time it took the historian to produce every baroquely rolling sentence of his masterpiece. In that sense the pieces here are most unGibbonish, written on the fly (though after much thought): capers and flourishes that try to share the passion – whether enthusiasm or grief – for their subjects. If they were not always hot off the press, they were often hot from my head.

But then I got the hot-metal romance early. I wasn’t even out of grey flannel short trousers and snake belt when our class got taken to Fleet Street some time in the mid-1950s. The *Daily Mirror* had it all, I thought: shrivelled trolls with the right kind of fungal pallor, chained to machines that chattered out type; trays of set pages; even the occasional green eyeshade; the whole wizard’s den culminating in sheets of raw newsprint cascading into bins. Was there ever a headier bouquet – cheap cigarettes and printers’ ink? They had to drag me back to the school coach.

Paradise got postponed. I signed up as soon as I could for the secondary-school magazine, but it was a prim production called *The Skylark*, bound in air-force-blue paper and featuring deadly reports on the doings of the school hockey team interspersed with juvenile odes to the Grampians. The paper signified the sky part, I supposed, but I was more interested in the lark. I got it when the school librarian, the son of a Labour MP, got busy with a subversive publication, printed clandestinely in the art rooms after school. Called *Perspective*, like all lefty

broad­sides which didn't really have any, it railed gloriously against British policy in Cyprus and defended EOKA bombs and ambushes as legitimate self-defence. I was but a baby gofer to the sixth-form comrade editor whose extreme unfriendliness I took as a sign of iron political discipline, but I loved every minute of the transgression, stacking copies in the inner sanctum of the library office, unbeknownst to the kindly Latin teacher whom we were getting in the hottest of water. It was a tribute to our modest powers of circulation, I suppose, that at some point, men in pork-pie hats and raincoats (I swear) paid a visit to the headmaster and invoked, so we heard, the Official Secrets Act. While we were happy not to be expelled along with our mastermind, our reverence for his steely wickedness only intensified with the glamour of his indictment.

The first pieces I got published in a newspaper appeared in *The Jewish Chronicle*, where I was working to keep myself in winkle-pickers, as a cutter and paster in the library. But the real bonus was getting dates with the editor's curvy daughter, who in turn procured for me the occasional classical music review. From the beginning, then, journalism was a pleasure, the only snag being that I knew absolutely nothing about classical music, save the occasional well-intentioned lunchbreak tutorial from a schoolfriend who would lecture me about Bruckner and Shostakovich, which would have been instructive had I not been distracted by the fragments of amateurishly assembled egg-salad sandwich that clung gothically to his front teeth. But for this girl I was willing to learn and through careful study noticed, in the reviews of those who did actually know something about the subject, the recurrence of certain key terms: 'lyrical', 'stirring', 'sensitive', 'brilliant' and so on. Off I went with the date to Annie Fischer, David Oistrakh or the Amadeus Quartet and, back home, more or less randomly assembled the adjectives in plausible order. You would be amazed how often they coincided with the professional notices.

At Cambridge my precocious knack for hackery found the perfect outlet, not in the classic *Varsity*, which seemed to me dominated by public-school oligarchs who said '*yaar*' indicating 'yes', while actually meaning 'not on your fucking life, sunshine'. 'Hey, could I have a job at *Varsity*?' 'Well, *yaar*.' So my friends and I peeled off to found a rival paper, called with unoriginal optimism: *New Cambridge*. I wrote, I edited a bit, I loved the picador thrusts at the opposition rag and chewed

lustily on a pipe like Charles Foster Kane. On the side, my mate Martin Sorrell – the financial brains of our publishing duo – overran a glossy magazine that high-mindedly devoted itself to a single issue per issue: the state of British prisons in Michaelmas term, the state of British art in Lent. With authentically undergraduate lack of irony, it called itself *Cambridge Opinion*, and unsold towers of it were stashed in a mysterious cavity in the rooms of the amiable anthropologist Edmund Leach, who was even more chaotic than the editor (yours truly) and treated its unique combination of unsellability and pretentiousness as a tremendous hoot. Martin and I would get a sudden order for five copies of *British Art: The Future* from the Whitechapel Gallery, would scoot over to Leach's lair and attempt to extract them from his cupboard. One or other of us would disappear within its shadowy depths, sometimes torch in hand, but inevitably fail to find the missing numbers. Meanwhile, Leach's fireplace burned with suspicious brilliance. 'You wouldn't know where they might be, Dr Leach, would you?' we would ask. 'Oh no,' he would chortle, 'behind *Africa Today* possibly? Have another glass.'

Towards the end of our last year, another prolifically literary pal, Robert Lacey, won an essay competition orchestrated by the *Sunday Times* as an exercise in talent-scouting. Robert's prize was a job on the paper, then edited by Harold Evans in his sensational (but not sensationalist) prime. It was the moment when the paper took the daring step of inventing what was then called a 'colour supplement' that could include nifty advice on the best years for St-Emilion along with harrowing Don McCullin pictures of the war in Vietnam. The cheerful and, at that time, almost spherical Godfrey Smith presided over this mini-colony of the paper where Robert had his desk. From one of their shrewd brains came the notion that a drop in summer sales might be countered by an ongoing series of Educational Value that readers might be induced to collect, week by week, and then assemble in their very own black plastic binder. It was to be called *A Thousand Makers of the Twentieth Century*, each micro-biography running to a few hundred words, whether the subject was Rasputin or Rommel, Pétain or Picasso. (Space allowances were made for the outsize monsters of history. Hitler must have got 800.) Organised alphabetically, it began naturally with Alvar Aalto and ended (I think) with Zog of Albania. Lacey was a hotshot editor and, being the good egg he was and is, sublet some of the work to his mates languishing in tutorial chores back in the Fens.

So I did Nazis and Dutch persons (though not Dutch Nazis) and would make trips down to the Gray's Inn Road, lurking ecstatically amidst the journalists' desks until they noticed me and even gave me the occasional reporter's chore. I was in hack heaven.

Thousand Makers was just crazy enough to succeed. Punters bought their black plastic binders by the crateload. We were a big hit and I learned something about conciseness, with which the Schama style had not hitherto been much associated. Communiqués of delight came down from On High, the office of Roy, the First Baron Thomson of Fleet. What also came down one day was an enquiry about who was going to be penning the item on the Queen. Somehow the royal name had gone unaccountably missing from our lengthy list of twentieth-century Makers. What, I thought, had she made? People happy? On the whole, tick, but what could be said about that? The TV monarchy? There was an idea. I wrote round the Usual Suspects, but no takers, so it fell to muggins, being the lowest on the totem pole. Off went something about the televised coronation, but with the faintest, merest hint that the royal round of Commonwealth ceremonies were not invariably a day at the beach (or gymkhana). Harrumphing sounds were heard from Above to the effect that something more entirely reverential was called for. The writers of *Makers*, including the doughty Godfrey, stood by my piece, but at the last minute an editorial courtier broke ranks and produced a piece of unexceptional flattery. Someone, though, leaked the story to *Private Eye*, which ran the pieces – Establishment and Not – side by side. I was, inadvertently, the custodian of integrity. But as Isaiah Berlin used to say, just because the honours that come one's way may be richly undeserved doesn't mean to say we won't take them.

I'd had my tiny taste of trouble and I wanted much more, especially since for most of the working week I was having to behave myself as a history don, dishing out anything from Abelard to Adlai Stevenson to my student victims. It wasn't the pay – £800 a year and all the Amontillado I could drink – that kept me down on the farm. I was hooked on history and would stay that way. But I needed my journalism jag too, so in between moonlighting in London and supervising in College I took on the editing of the weekly academic magazine, *The Cambridge Review*. This had been the closest a journal could get to sherry and still be made of paper. But it had been going for nearly eighty years, and now and then its pages would make room for the

likes of Bertrand Russell or Sylvia Plath. It was, as everyone pointed out, An Institution. Which of course made it a prime target for the Furies who were very much at large in 1968. I had two colleagues in the editorial hot seat, both American, one Marxist, one an economist who would later make serious money. I was the wet liberal centrist in between, but most of all I wanted the *Review* to mix things up a bit. There was tear gas on the boulevards (I got a whiff of it one day in Montparnasse). Imagination had been declared by Jean-Louis Barrault to be *en pouvoir*, and in Cambridge Situationists were making silly buggers of themselves in the Senate House, along with more serious sitters-in who had the fantastic notion that some sort of academic democracy might be *en pouvoir* on King's Parade. It was absurd, but it made for fabulous copy and we dished it up, the covers of the magazine being black modernist designs on dark red and blue. Moody! Not exactly what the dons were expecting, but never mind, I hired pals like Clive James to do reviews and attempted to hold the sententiousness of my American co-editors somewhat at bay. Every week saw a panicky rendezvous with the composing printer round the corner and some heavy imbibing after we put it to bed.

A year or so later, the Revolution in the Fens but a heady memory, we dreamed up the idea of an anthology of some of the best writing over the life of the *Review* and, to our amazement, Jonathan Cape agreed to publish it. Out it came in 1972, bejacketed in a peculiar shade of pink (more or less my politics), grandly entitled *The Cambridge Mind*. Though we had pieces by examples of the most rarefied regions of the Cantabrigian medulla – G. E. Moore, J. J. Thompson, William Empson – I knew this was asking for trouble of the chucklesome kind, but I was outvoted by my more serious colleagues and collaborated in an introduction of numbing loftiness. The anthology was reviewed, rather kindly, by Hugh Trevor-Roper, who pointed out that *The Oxford Magazine* had published a similar anthology some time before called *The Oxford Sausage*. The difference in titles, he implied, with that thin literary smirk he assumed at moments of intense self-amusement, was all you needed to know. In private I knew he was right.

There followed the years of Rain in The Hague: gallons of it streaming down the windows of the old National Archive where I endured a lonely research vigil, thinking – a lot – about one of my best friends who had decided to do his research in Venice. Whenever I could I high-

tailed it to Amsterdam, then in the throes of stupendous cultural uproar, a non-stop porno-dope-anarcho-rock-and-roll madness. Major publications were called things like *Suck* and knew, it is fair to say, even by the standards of the time, no bounds. In a disused church a coagulated jam of bodies swayed (dancing was physically impossible) to violent music, while lava-lamp blobs oiled their way over a huge screen where once an altar had stood. Limbs became confused, and then the rest of us. Back in Cambridge, Lawrence Stone was contrasting the slow historical evolution of sex and marriage with the outbreak of what he called, smiling merrily (and quoting *that* line of Philip Larkin's), 'polymorphous sexuality'. In Amsterdam I knew what he meant.

As I slowly and painfully assembled the source materials for my first book, Carlyle's phantasmagoric vision of the archive as an interminable coral reef stretching away as far as could be imagined often appeared before me. The danger of drowning was real. So, more than ever, I needed to surface and get a hit of oxygenated journalism. Kindly, clever John Gross came to my aid with assignments to write about art for the *TLS*, and lots of hospitable editors followed – at *New Society*, Tony Elliott at the young *Time Out* (which was decent of him since I'd been part of the gang that tried to compete with him with a Richard Neville publication, *Ink*, a gloriously stoned and thus inevitably short-lived affair). After my first book appeared in 1977, to mostly positive reviews, editors on both sides of the Atlantic began commissioning pieces, which I turned in always on time and always overwritten, both length-wise and adjective-wise.

I have been lucky ever since; more than most, I think, in the generosity with which editors of all styles and philosophies have let me run around, not just in history, art and politics – the fields in which I graze in my book-length scholarly life – but in other departments of enthusiasm: music, film, theatre and, the writing which is simultaneously most challenging and most rewarding, words about food. Cooks – at least those who don't have to sweat it for a living – will tell you that the whole business is about the delivery of pleasure; the sampling of that lovely moment when, if one has done fairly well, even the most garrulous company will fall silent after a bite or two and get lost in delight. This salmagundi – a thing of various tastes and textures – is likewise offered to my readers in a similar hope that some of it, at least, might go down a treat.