

# Last night's TV



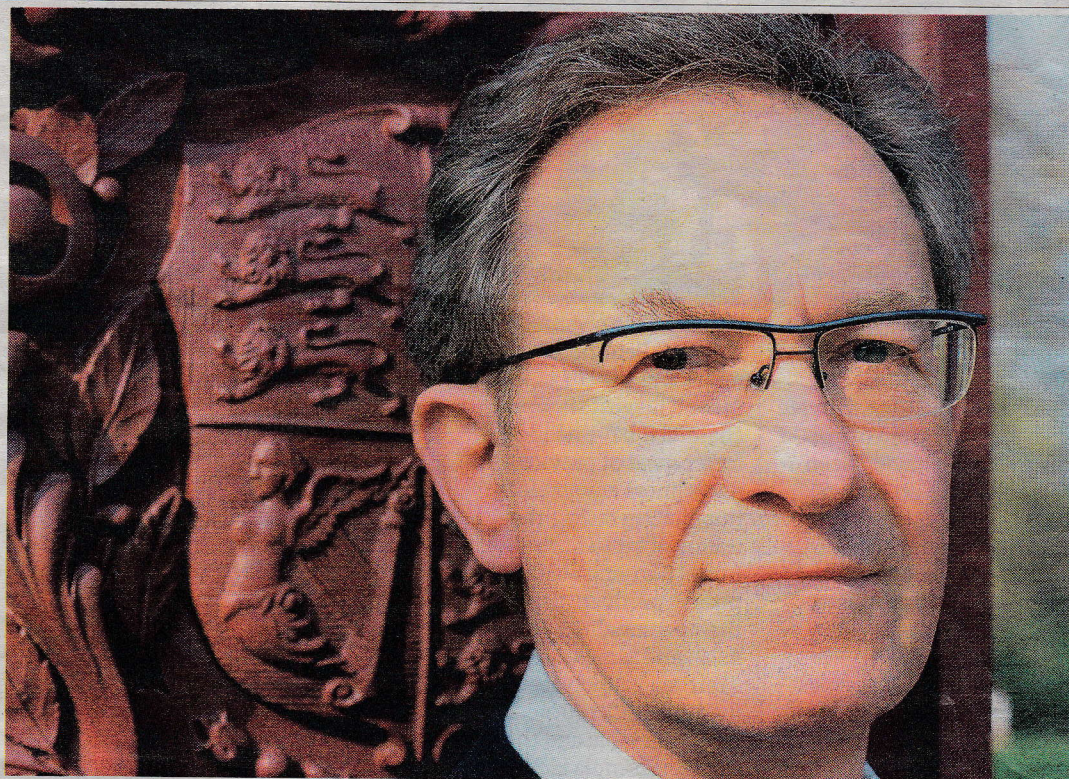
## Tim Dowling Simon Schama made poetry work on TV - by getting Fiona Shaw to jog along to John Donne

“He was born in London to members of a persecuted religious minority. A couple of his uncles were of a militant bent, and he was brought up, it was said, “with an expectation of martyrdom”. His life’s aim, however, was to insinuate himself into the heart of the establishment. And he succeeded.

That may be a provocative introduction to the poet John Donne, but it’s no exaggeration. As a Catholic born in Elizabethan England, a quiet life was not an option. In **Simon Schama’s John Donne** (BBC2), we learn that his brother Henry was arrested for harbouring a Jesuit at the age of 21, and died within weeks of his imprisonment. John, on the other hand, studied law, became a soldier and then an MP, before wrecking his future by secretly marrying against the wishes of an influential patron. Later, he converted to Anglicanism and died the Dean of St Paul’s. In his spare time he was, as Schama puts it, “the most electrifying poet in the English language”.

There was a mildly depressing bit at the beginning, where Schama interviewed a load of people in the street who cheerfully admitted that they’d never heard of Donne. We have lost the sense, it seems, that this is the sort of thing we ought to lie about. It’s a shame, because the poems themselves (performed, at one point while jogging, by Fiona Shaw) retain an unparalleled immediacy, despite the intervening centuries and the freeform orthography of the time (when how many Es you put in “me” depended on how you were feeling that morning). Donne’s *To His Mistris Going to Bed* was considered so indecent that it was omitted from his first edition of poems, and even today it is still possible to be taken aback by what Schama calls its “sheer conversational effrontery”.

It can be a bit difficult to find suitably televisual images to illustrate poetry, but this programme had two great advantages. The first was snow: on at least one of the days when Schama tramped round London delivering his narration to camera, it snowed properly, the way it usually does only in Richard Curtis films, and this went a long way to erasing the years that separated the modern city from the one where John Donne was born in 1572. The second advantage was Schama’s heavily annotated paperback copy



**A helping hand for exam cheats ... Simon Schama in his John Donne appreciation**

of Donne’s poems, which was filmed from every angle in shaky close-up and abruptly pulled focus. It made you feel as if you were cheating in an exam by reading over someone’s shoulder.

In **Painting the Mind** (More4) we met two men who share an obsession. Neither of them can stop making art, not because they are driven or ambitious, but because they’re brain damaged. Tommy McHugh is a Scouse builder with a criminal past. One morning when he was sitting on the toilet, he had not one, but two strokes. Jon Sarkin, a chiropractor from Massachusetts, suffered with a noise like a fire alarm going off between his ears for a year, until an operation to put it right caused a stroke, necessitating the removal of half his cerebellum.

Both were confused, impaired and depressed. But they also became “disinhibited” and seized by a compulsion to draw. McHugh could only do stick men at first, but his work eventually became quite accomplished. Sarkin is

now a professional artist, with a dealer and everything.

What made this programme so fascinating was not just the questions it raised about where the creative impulse lies, but the way it illuminated the very purpose of art, especially the needs it satisfies in the artist. Sarkin is clear about why he does it: “My art is an agreement between my compulsions and obsessions and I.”

It was reckoned that the second series of **Flight of the Conchords** (BBC4) would suffer in comparison with the first, since the former drew on the duo’s impressive folk-parody back catalogue, and fresh material would have to be written in comparative haste. This overlooks the fact that the fictional Conchords are *supposed* to be a bit lame. Last night’s episode opened with Bret, in his guise as the Rhymenoceros, taking to the mic to diss rival MCs. “Eminem,” he raps, “is not very good. 50 Cent is not very good. Snoop Dogg is not very good...” It was very funny, but I can see how you might have to take my word for that. In any case, you can’t say success has spoiled them.

**Some people said they’d never heard of Donne; we’ve lost the sense, it seems, that we should lie about this sort of thing**

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