

ANTENNA



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ON LAST NIGHT'S TV

UNLESS something immensely remarkable hastens along at the witching hour **A HISTORY OF BRITAIN** (BBC2) is definitely programme of the year. Not to mention the surprise hit with an average of four million hypnotised viewers – vast numbers for BBC2. And it isn't just the figures, though hopefully the sums involved will finally alert commissioning editors to the fact that when the box dumbs down it doesn't mean audiences automatically become stupid. It's also the people tuning in.

My nephews and nieces on the Shankill Road are as galvanised by Simon Schama's (right) take on our green and often unpleasant land every bit as much as my hairdresser and blood specialist best friend.

Why shouldn't they be? Last night's final episode on Elizabeth, Mary and the unification of England and Scotland once again had the grip of authority and the excitement of really great gossip. The eye which served Schama so well as smart yet colloquial art critic for the New Yorker was immediately evident in his first choice of image – the Virgin Queen near death, suffering the coronation ring to be sawn off her finger because the gold had emblematically grown into the flesh and vice versa. We saw wisps of what looked like smoke and fluff twirl in the air but Schama had already painted the picture in words evocative and easily grasped.

'Unless something hastens along at the witching hour, A History Of Britain is programme of the year'

This is one of the oddities of television. The primarily visual medium is the perfect platform for talkers – if you get the perfect talker. Schama is.

It's hard to mind scenes of the Bloody Tower popping up the moment he mentions it – it's known as show-and-tell in the business – because the Tower's place in Tudor politics has already been brought to vivid life. And Schama does surprise. His refusal to be "starry-eyed" about possibly our greatest monarch refreshed and amused: "She adored being adored." Still, it sounded to me as if presenter and subject had much in common: "Composure...clarity... self-confidence... a gift for rhetoric and public speech." Roll on next year's second run.

