

Majestical mystery tour

WHAT a splendid piece of work the first series in what promises eventually to be a magnificent TV landmark, *The History Of Britain* By Simon Schama, has turned out to be.

Last night, Schama was on well-trodden ground in *The Body Of The Queen*, in which he told the story of Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots, cousins and enemies who profoundly affected each other's lives (Mary's death was ordered by Elizabeth), but were fated never to meet.

Now the British-born history professor, who works at an American university, must draw breath before moving on to later periods in our country's history.

Of course, we've only recently had Dr David Starkey's excellent Channel 4 series on Elizabeth, and an award-winning film in which Cate Blanchett so memorably recreated the earlier years of the Virgin Queen.

The movie *Elizabeth* also featured Sir Francis Walsingham as a predatory and murderous homosexual — not, it must be said, how Schama presented Gloriana's intelligence chief, although he



by
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A History Of Britain: The Body Of The Queen (BBC2)

conceded it was Walsingham's job 'to get his hands dirty for England'.

Professor Schama has brought such a vividness in both words and pictures to the Tudor age that, despite its familiarity, it has almost been like hearing about it all for the first time: there was even a calligrapher on hand to inscribe Elizabeth's familiar florid signature on Mary's death warrant.

I was much taken by last night's clever opening sequence — 40 seconds that were reminiscent of those photographic puzzles where an everyday object is pictured from an unusual angle, or a tiny detail is enlarged.

Then the commentary revealed we were watching a re-enactment of Elizabeth's coronation ring — symbol of her betrothal to England — being filed off her finger, 45 years after it had first been slipped on, as she lay on her death bed.

The gold filings glittered on the

screen, accompanied by the ugly, rasping sound of the file. Then the picture dissolved to show the stone effigies of the two queens, ironically only yards apart, in their final resting place in Westminster Abbey. The ring was destined for Mary's child, and Elizabeth's successor, King James I.

On reflection, I'm probably wrong to give the credit for that opening sequence to Schama rather than his producer-director Clare Beavan. But other attempts to solve the problem of presenting the essentially static remnants of a past age — stilted portraits, old inscriptions, ancient buildings — were a bit overdone.

AS Schama spoke of conspiracies, we had the familiar image on the screen of a horseman galloping across a bleak landscape, presumably carrying details of the plotters' intentions to each other before the advent of the penny post or e-mail.

Rebellions were invariably represented by filling the frame with fire or strutting peacocks.

Professor Schama, it must be said, is not the most prepossessing of presenters. Sometimes, wearing his

leather jacket and owlish spectacles, he looks like a newly-famous comedian appearing as an apprehensive guest on his first chat show.

But his script is colourful and sharp, and his anecdotes as well turned as those of the great historian Edward Gibbon. For example, one of Elizabeth's tutors, who taught her rhetoric, was described as 'not just another low-rent don'.

Elizabeth realised that 'statecraft is also stagecraft', and one reason for the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley's attraction for Elizabeth, was summed up as 'both were orphans of the scaffold' — her mother, Anne Boleyn, and his father having died by the axe.

There is also Schama's wonderful eye for the small but telling detail.

Elizabeth, for instance, in danger of being tarnished by rumours as a teenager that she had conceived a child by her guardian, Thomas Seymour, signed her letter of denial to Lord Protector Somerset: 'Your friend of little power, Elizabeth.' She was only 14, but already her political and survival instincts were acute.

When it came to Mary Queen of Scots, Schama was again on top form.

The story may be familiar, but he approached it with a freshness that made one realise why it has

attracted so many novelists, playwrights and composers over the centuries.

His account of the murder of Mary's private secretary, David Rizzio — he suffered 50-60 stab wounds after being 'dragged from Mary's skirts and his body thrown down the privy steps' by his assassins — was chilling, while Mary's execution was narrated with an almost salacious fervour.

By contrast, the description of the end of Mary's second husband, Lord Darnley, who had ordered Rizzio's death, was hilarious.

The Earl of Bothwell, who was to become Mary's brutish third husband, arranged for gunpowder to be placed under the house where Darnley was staying.

Hearing a suspicious noise, Darnley was lowered from his bedroom window by a chair suspended from a rope (dutifully illustrated with a Jacobean chair swinging from a turret), ran across the garden in his nightshirt and, encountering the plotters, was promptly throttled.

'Darnley's death was a turning point in Mary's life,' intoned Schama solemnly. 'From now on, death followed Mary Stuart like a lady-in-waiting.'

That's a quality line from a quality programme.

PICK OF THE DAY

FILM: *Still Of The Night*, BBC1, 12.10am (not N Ireland)

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