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A History of Britain, Vol. 2: The Wars of the British, 1603-1776

Simon Schama

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Inside these pages lies the bloody epic of liberty, the British Iliad.

The second volume of Simon Schama's *A History of Britain* brings the histories of Britain's civil wars -- full of blighted idealism, shocking carnage, and unexpected outcomes -- startlingly to life. These conflicts were fought unsparingly between the nations of the islands -- Ireland, England, and Scotland -- and between parliament and the crown. Shattering the illusion of a "united kingdom," they cost hundreds of thousands of lives: a greater proportion of the population than died in the First World War.

When religious passion gave way to the equally consuming passion for profits, it became possible for the pieces of Britain to come together as the spectacularly successful business enterprise of "Britannia Incorporated." And in a few generations that business state expanded in a dizzying process that transformed what had been an obscure, off-shore footnote to Europe's great powers into the main event -- the most powerful empire in the world.

Yet somehow, it was the "wrong empire." The British considered it a bastion of liberty, yet it was based on military force and the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Africans. In America, the emptiness of British claims to protect "freedom" was thrown back into the teeth of colonial governors and redcoat soldiers, while the likes of Sam Adams and George Washington inherited the mantle of Cromwell.

Simon Schama grippingly evokes the horror of the battle, famine, and plague; the flames of burning cities; the pathos of broken families, with fathers and sons forced to choose opposing sides. But he also captures the intimacies of palace and parliament and the seductions of profit and pleasure. Geniuses like John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, and Benjamin Franklin stalk vividly through his pages, but so do Scottish clansmen, women pamphleteers, and literate, eloquent African slaves like Olaudah Equiano.

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