The Last Knight and the Dying Fall: Cultural Regression in British Documentary Television

by Christopher Carson (August 2025)

The Triumph of Galatea (Raphael, 1512)

Dedication: To the ghosts of Kenneth Clark, Jacob Bronowski and Sir Roger Scruton, who showed that to describe the ascent of man is not enough; one must also understand the frailty of his towers.

The High Humanist Moment

In the winter of 1969, the BBC introduced British audiences to a remarkable experiment in public culture: *Civilisation: A Personal View*: thirteen hour-long episodes guided by Kenneth Clark, the distinguished art historian and former director of the National Gallery. To call it a documentary is to understate its ambition. *Civilisation* was a manifesto of high humanism, presented not as entertainment, nor even as education in the narrow sense, but as a testament: a public affirmation that the Western tradition, with all its grandeur and frailty, was a civilizational inheritance worth defending and understanding.

Clark's opening lines remain emblematic of a confidence already on the cusp of dissolution: "What is civilisation? I don't know. I can't define it in abstract terms yet. But I think I can recognise it when I see it." Here was no invitation to irony, no apology for the grand sweep of the narrative. Clark assumed, perhaps quixotically even then, that his viewers were not mere consumers but heirs, that they carried in their minds enough familiarity with Augustine and Aquinas, Giotto and Gibbon, Chartres and the Sistine Chapel, to follow him through a meditation on continuity, upheaval, and the slow transmission of culture. He did not seek to flatter his audience; he expected them to ascend.

This was no accident of personality. It reflected a broader post-war compact between public institutions and the citizenry: that a liberal education was not a private luxury, but a public good; that the canon of Western civilization was not a fortress, but a common inheritance. In the Britain of grammar schools and modestly rising literacy, it was still possible to believe that public culture could aspire to the level of cathedral architecture: not merely vast, but intricately wrought, built to endure.

And so Clark's *Civilisation* marched methodically from the fall of Rome to the dawn of the twentieth century, through medieval scholasticism, Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment rationalism, and the uneasy ferment of the modern age. His was a narrative of ascent, certainly, but also one conscious of fragility: the understanding that the cultural achievements he celebrated were not inevitable, but painstakingly constructed and easily lost. "Civilisation requires a modicum of material prosperity," Clark observed, "enough to provide a little leisure. But far more, it requires confidence—confidence in the society in which one lives, belief in its philosophy, belief in its laws, and belief in its own arts." By that standard, *Civilisation* was already elegiac at its inception, for Clark intuited that such confidence was waning.

The Early Diversifications

If *Civilisation* was the high-water mark of the British humanist documentary, the 1970s introduced the first discernible shifts: not an outright rejection, but a diversification, a gentle migration away from the single, sweeping narrative voice, and toward a more complex, more fragmented view of culture and knowledge. In 1973, the BBC aired *The Ascent of Man*, Jacob Bronowski's magisterial history of science and the scientific imagination. Like Clark, Bronowski was a figure of great authority: a mathematician, a cultural philosopher, a survivor of the century's brutalities. But his narrative was distinct. Where Clark moved through the visible artifacts of civilization, meaning cathedrals, paintings, manuscripts, Bronowski mapped the invisible architectures of reason, experimentation, and doubt. His was the ascent not of empires or cathedrals, but of the human mind.

Bronowski's voice was no less grave than Clark's, but it bore a deeper, almost anguished caution. The Holocaust shadowed his

reflections; his famous walk into the pond at Auschwitz, scooping a handful of mud and human ash, was a stark reminder that scientific knowledge divorced from moral clarity could become monstrous. “It is said that science will dehumanize people and turn them into numbers. That is false—tragically false. Look for yourself.”

If Clark’s project was to affirm the cultural canon, Bronowski’s was to affirm the rational conscience: to remind viewers that knowledge without humility leads not to ascent but to annihilation. Where Bronowski maintained the earnest gravity of high humanism, the next shift came with a slyer tone. In 1978, James Burke’s *Connections* aired: a series no less ambitious than its predecessors, but strikingly different in method.

Burke eschewed linear, hierarchical storytelling in favor of an ironic, almost playful exploration of historical causality. Technological progress, in *Connections*, was not the grand march of reason or beauty, but a chaotic daisy chain of accidents; an erratic dance from the spinning jenny to the jet engine, the plow to the microchip. Burke’s manner was brisk, mischievous, even self-parodying at times; a far cry from Clark’s donnish gravitas or Bronowski’s sober earnestness. Yet beneath the irony was a serious point: History is not a cathedral; it is a web. Progress is not a hymn; it is a tangle. With Burke, the long narrative of ascent fractured into networks, intersections, contingencies. The confident continuity Clark assumed was subtly replaced by a vision of history as anarchic bricolage: not a grand march, but a scramble.

Importantly, *Connections* was still demanding in its way. It presumed an audience capable of following complex causal chains, of appreciating irony without surrendering to cynicism. The high humanist tone had softened, but not collapsed. The edifice still stood; its outlines blurred now, its scaffolding more visible but not yet razed.

Romantic Skepticism: The Personal Quest Era

By the 1980s and 1990s, the British documentary tradition had entered a new phase, one in which the authority of the guide was no longer drawn from institutional gravitas or canonical mastery, but from a more personal voice, a pilgrim's tone. The presenter was no longer a distant, magisterial figure; he was a traveler, a seeker, an investigator moving through the fractured remnants of history and culture. Few embodied this shift more gracefully than Michael Wood. His *In Search of the Trojan War* (1985) was a documentary about the ancient world, but also a journey, a quest, a series of pilgrimages through myth, archaeology, and fragmentary evidence. Wood appeared not as the voice of final judgment but as a companion, a fellow traveler offering tentative hypotheses and inviting the viewer to share in the uncertainties.

Gone was the unified, declarative narrative of Clark or Bronowski. Wood's method reflected the changing sensibility of the late twentieth century: a skepticism of grand narratives. A romance for the incomplete, the fragmentary, the unresolved. A recognition that the past might never fully disclose its secrets, and that the search itself was the reward.

Similarly, in *In Search of Shakespeare* (2003), Wood ventured not to pronounce on the Bard's life with finality, but to offer an extended meditation on possibilities, including the contentious suggestion of Shakespeare's Catholic sympathies, a topic treated with scrupulous nuance and restraint.

Simon Schama would take this personalization even further. His *A History of Britain* (2000–2002) and later *The Power of Art* (2006) were not just historical surveys; they were lyrical performances, personal reflections filtered through Schama's evident passion for crisis, rupture, and transformation. The past was no longer presented as a continuous, elevating

tradition; it was a series of fractures, a landscape of emotional and intellectual volatility.

Schama's style was rich, dense, emotive: a historian not merely chronicling but dramatizing, often standing in the literal ruins of historical moments, speaking in a tone not of magisterial remove but of urgent proximity. In both Wood and Schama, we see the deepening of the postmodern suspicion toward grand coherence. The past was no longer a stable inheritance to be surveyed; it was a contested field to be navigated.

Yet it must be noted: for all their shift toward personalization and romantic skepticism, these documentaries still aspired to seriousness: they still respected the intellect of their audience, still believed in the value of history, however fragmentary, still operated within the gravitational pull of the older high humanist tradition, even as they charted its gradual decline. The edifice was no longer intact, but its stones were treated with reverence, even as they were rearranged into new, less stable forms.

Acceleration and Fragmentation: The High-Information Era

By the early 2000s, the character of British public culture had shifted again, not by conscious revolt, but by the more insidious logic of technological acceleration. The long- form, meditative series: once the gold standard, now found itself compressed, the narrative arcs tightened, the assumptions of historical literacy weakened. Documentaries became faster, more visual, less argumentative, and more emotive.

James Burke returned and cleverly sensing this shift, adapted his earlier *Connections* model into *Connections 2* (1994) and *The Day the Universe Changed* (1985), both faster-paced and denser in causal linkages. The narrative chains remained intricate, but the presentation style betrayed the creeping

anxiety: an audience with radically limited attention spans must be seized quickly or lost. Where Burke once gently unraveled the serendipitous pathways of invention, now he fired them at the viewer, like rapid salvos of historical trivia. The irony remained, but the time for lingering reflection had dwindled. This acceleration was not limited to technological history.

In 2018, the BBC mounted *Civilisations*, which was a deliberate *pluralization* of Clark's earlier singular *Civilisation*. The series abandoned the single authoritative voice in favor of multiple presenters, rejected the Western canon in favor of global art histories, and adopted the democratized tone of contemporary cultural pluralism. This an abdication of the idea that a unified narrative could still be told, or should be told. In *Civilisations*, every culture was a civilization, every tradition a triumph, every story equally worthy, and all get a prize. No cathedral towered above the others; there were only villages, markets, mosaics. The production values were higher than ever; stunning visuals, sweeping drone shots, and lush scores, but the intellectual gravity had lightened. Gone were the long chains of inference, the slow unfolding of argument, the presumption of a shared historical vocabulary. In their place: visual immediacy, narrative fragmentation, plurality without hierarchy. The result was not without beauty, but it was a beauty of surfaces: reflective, shimmering, but thin. The cathedral had not been desecrated; it had been disassembled, with its stones scattered across a global field, each fragment gleaming, but no longer cohering into a structure one might walk into for shelter or for awe.

Closing Meditation: The Last Knight and the Dying Fall

Yet if one listens carefully, as the tide of high humanism recedes, a final strain still lingers on the air: faint, unresolved, but unmistakably noble. In 2009, Sir Roger

Scruton, philosopher and aesthete, offered what might be called the last great defense of beauty in the British documentary tradition. His film, *Why Beauty Matters*, was an unapologetic affirmation of the enduring human need for order, harmony, and transcendence; a need too easily dismissed by the fractious, ironic, short-form temper of the age.

Against the rising din of relativism and the fragmentation of cultural authority, Scruton stood not defiantly, but gravely, and spoke in tones now alien to public discourse: beauty matters because it points beyond itself to meaning, to reconciliation, to home. Scruton was no naïf. He knew that the cultural ground beneath him had shifted, that the confident cadences of the Western canon had softened into disharmony, and that the word "beauty" itself had come to seem antique, almost embarrassing, in many academic and critical circles. He made no polemic, no bombast. His was the quieter art of keeping an older faith.

When the British Crown conferred a knighthood upon him in 2016, it was not a rallying call for a cultural revival but rather a gesture of recognition: a final, courteous bow to a tradition that even those bestowing the honor understood was passing. Scruton was not knighted to lead a charge, but to bear a standard into honorable retirement: perhaps a valediction for an older intellectual order, given to its last loyal guardian. One likes to imagine that somewhere beyond these transitory life-seasons, Lord Clark of Saltwood and Sir Roger Scruton have shaken hands: co-conspirators in the slow, dignified withdrawal of high humanism from the center of British public life. No fanfare, no outcry, only the distant, fading notes of a music now all but forgotten.

Reception: The Three Audiences

The documentary's reception and Scruton's subsequent

knighthood in 2016 tell a tale of three Britains:

The General Public: Among serious viewers, admittedly a dwindling class, *Why Beauty Matters* was received with warmth and quiet gratitude. Here, at last, was a voice articulating what many felt but lacked words for: that something noble was being lost; that beauty, once treated as a sacred trust, was now traded for novelty, shock, and transience.

The Commentariat: Fleet Street, such as it remained, responded with cool formality. The Tory *Telegraph* and even the*Times* praised the knighthood as a fitting honor for a public philosopher who had dared to be serious in unserious times. *The Guardian* and *The Independent* covered it with a raised eyebrow: polite, but faintly sardonic, noting Scruton's controversial career without engaging his arguments. He was treated not as a cultural hero, nor even as a true antagonist, but as a curiosity, a relic of a bygone intellectual aristocracy now rendered obselete, much as Lord Mountbatten of Burma had been sent off into memory after his assassination by the IRA.

The Academy: Academia, long since disenchanted with objective standards, beauty, and canon, responded with strategic silence. Scruton's name rarely passed the lips of art historians, literary theorists, or philosophers of aesthetics any more; when it did, it was often with the studied air of professionals too busy with progressive concerns to debate what they quietly regarded as a dead language: beauty, hierarchy, tradition. In truth, Scruton's knighthood was less a summons than a valediction: an acknowledgment that he represented not the future of British intellectual life, but its closing refrain; the last chord of a once-magnificent symphony, fading not in outrage but in a gentle dying fall.

The Dying Fall: From Chartres to the Crimson Sofa

Culture does not end in high tragedy. It declines, as Eliot foresaw, not with a bang but with a whimper, or perhaps, a gaudy laugh. In the Britain of the early twenty-first century, where once the Sistine Ceiling, the Rafael Rooms, Castle Howard and the Great Chain of Being structured public imagination, now another kind of stage commands attention: *The Graham Norton Show*—a brightly colored, shambolic celebration of celebrity triviality.

Here, the set gleams in synthetic hues, the laughter is amplified, and conversation flickers like a mayfly across topics of little consequence. Where once the cathedrals of Chartres or the musings of Burke and Bronowski invited the educated mind to ascend, now, under the lurid lights, conversation tumbles into anecdote, double entendre, and the bright, frictionless present. Graham Norton's crimson sofa is the perfect emblem of this end: democratic to a fault, frictionless, forgoing memory for momentary amusement. The show is wildly popular, as perhaps it should be, in an age that regards earnestness with suspicion and grand narratives with exhausted indifference.

A Quiet Benediction

And yet, even as the laughter fades and the lights dim, it would be a mistake to declare the cathedral wholly fallen, or its memory erased. Civilizations do not vanish overnight, nor do traditions of thought and beauty die with their last public defenders. They retreat, they thin, they sleep, waiting for quieter minds and more patient hands. The strain may have a dying fall. But the music itself, if one listens closely, still endures.

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