

# Ronald reagan and the limits of hagiography



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Dutch, A Memoir of Ronald Reagan was a puzzling book for some since it is a fictionalized account of Ronald Reagan's life from the perspective of a secondary character that is a combination of the author and complete fiction. Even though Irving Stone wrote classic biographies using the same combination of facts and fiction for various historic persons like Sigmund Freud and Michelangelo, it still seems like a strange choice to take for an historical figure that was still alive. As thought-provoking as Morris's chosen format is, his insights do not fundamentally change the vision of Reagan that even a hasty overview of Reagan's perceived strengths of leadership reveals.

Edmund Morris was born in Kenya to South African parents and quickly moved to England. For a time he was a concert pianist and copywriter and by 1966, he immigrated to the United States with his wife. As an immigrant, he took to American history in a way that went beyond the official questions on the immigration form and he wrote his first book *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* in 1966. This is what would bring him to the attention of Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan was so impressed by Morris that he allowed him access to write a biography. However, Morris despaired of finding an inner life for Ronald Reagan who was one of the most extroverted presidents of the 20th century. According to Morris: "" Nobody around him understood him. I, every person I interviewed, almost without exception, eventually would say, ' You know, I could never really figure him out.'" (Stahl 2004). An analogy to Ronald Reagan might be Robin Williams who was always on to the point where it became hard to know where the real person began.

Despairing of capturing Reagan's inner life, Morris decided to make up a

fictionalized version of himself (20 years older and born in America) as well as a radical leftist son and a sarcastic newspaper columnist.

The main thesis of the book is that Ronald Reagan was a standard bearer of a new era and a great president, yet he was inscrutable. Since the book is written in the voice of a fictional character, the book can avoid the questions of objectivity. The book begins with Reagan at the Bitberg cemetery and the author telling us that “ Reagan stood within the reach of presidential greatness. Time and again – never more courageously than this day – he had struggled against circumstance and bent it to his will” (p. 3). Throughout the book, the author is supporting the thesis with strange details that don’t necessarily seem to have much to do with Ronald Reagan either as a person or a president or even an actor. For the most part, Ronald Reagan is merely a strangely blank character.

The strength of this approach is that it brings us a personal anecdotal way of talking about a person, but this can also become a weakness as the author inserts himself into the narrative in rather invasive ways. For example, the author looks at a picture of Reagan’s mother and father and states “ I couldn’t take my eyes off Nelle’s breasts. Here was a young woman full of the milk of life, relaxedly half-naked in public” (p. 13). I am not certain why the author wants us to know that Reagan’s mother was a big-breasted woman to the point of being “ full of milk” even if it is meant to contrast her young picture with her serious older self.

In another place, the author is stating that “ no better than a good high school player, Lieutenant Regan lacked the speed and toughness of his

yardbird opponents. Yet there was an easy grace to his running, and his long shots" (p. 203). Again one feels like the author is wasting our time with a statement about how Ronald Reagan has an easy grace. The sources might be one of the most aggravating parts of the text since some of them are made up in order to give the illusion that the characters in the book - the ones that are encountering Ronald Reagan - are real people and not fictional constructions. This makes the book rather confusing since the mixture of fiction and non-fiction doesn't really allow for much concrete beliefs.

Ultimately the author's thesis is rather uninspiring. Ronald Reagan was an important and game-changing president. Ronald Reagan had a great deal of charisma and an easy charm. These are not exactly revelations since Reagan sold America on a combination of radical fiscal and social conservatism in a way that made neither version of conservatism seem radical or incompatible. This is in sharp contrast to modern conservatism which is sharply split between social and fiscal with an increasingly angry Republican party unable to put forth a candidate charismatic enough to bring everyone together. The author states that Ronald Reagan is impossible to really know and while one can sympathize with the author attempting to write about a man that he obviously respected and admired in a dispassionate historical sense, the author brings nothing new to the table by spending an entire book telling us that Ronald Reagan was charismatic.

## **References**

Morris, E. (2000). *Dutch: A memoir of Ronald Reagan*. New York: Modern Library, Reprint Edition.

Stahl, L. (Jun 9, 2004). Morris: Reagan still a mystery. CBS News.