



BOOK REVIEW

Edmund Morris, Dutch,
New York: Random House, 1999.

Wandering through the halls at a meeting of presidential scholars, a badge caught my eye. I touched the sleeve of a man much more nattily dressed than most of the academics in attendance. “Edmund Morris!” I stammered. “What a coincidence! I’m reviewing your book.” Morris considered my badge. “For whom?”

“The *Oakland Journal*.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s new. This will be its second issue.”

“Another California intellectual rag?”

“Actually, it’s based in Michigan.”

“Yes, and I’ve heard there’s a California, Pennsylvania, too. Anyway, have you actually read the book, or just the blurb?”

“Every one of its 672 pages—and the 156 pages of notes.”

“What dedication! OK, so what do you think?”

“Well, as they say, ‘it’s a good read.’ The first couple of hundred pages read like the gossipy biography of a Hollywood star—because that’s exactly what they are. You did a great job interviewing so many of Reagan’s early acquaintances, girl friends and co-stars. I didn’t learn a lot about affairs of state, but I *did* learn a lot about Reagan’s early years. And I hadn’t realized how serious the damage was that he suffered from John Hinckley’s bullets.”

“Wow! What a great review. After 828 pages that’s all you’ve got to say?”

“Oh, there’s a *lot* more to say. I guess what I found most striking about your book is the contrast between your admiration of Reagan as President and his role in history and your confirmation and extension of many of the charges made by his detractors. I mean, you are the one he—or at least Nancy and his advisers—chose because they expected you to be politically sympathetic—and your book *is*. But *personally*, your contempt for Nancy is often evident, and Reagan himself comes across as a man living in fantasy and as a caricature of the family values he celebrated.”

“Come on, now. I say he was a good, decent man, who loved Nancy and his country.”

“All I can say is, if a ‘friend’ wrote those things about me, I’d look for a hole to crawl into. For instance—I happened to bring a copy of the book with me—you write about his ‘encyclopedic ignorance’ and his ‘. . . Daliesque ability to bend reality to his purposes’ and give numerous examples of the fictional ‘. . . world that rotates inside his cerebellum . . .’ (p. 414). You note that President Francois Mitterand of France was ‘taken aback by Reagan’s intellectual emptiness’ and asked Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau—who ‘made no attempt to conceal his contempt for Reagan’—‘What planet is he living on?’ (pp. 442–443). Briefed on the budget, ‘he listened but would not hear, or looked at figures and did not see (p.447).’ You say that he often makes no distinction between what happened in movies he has seen and reality.”

“Hey, look! You’re quoting out of context. A lot of that is reporting what other people have said. You’ve obviously never interviewed a President.”

“Actually, I once had the chance to interview Harry Truman, seven years after he left office. His ideology seemed conventional, too. But he came over much *better* in person than on television, and he had a great grip on reality and historical detail.”

“He was definitely *not* a great communicator, like Dutch.”

“True. But after seven months of interviewing Reagan, you write ‘Dutch remained a mystery to me, and . . . an apparent airhead. “What you see is what you get,” several of the above-named intimates had warned me, when I asked about his hidden depths. Nevertheless, I could not believe how little one indeed “got,” and how shallow those depths appeared to be. . . . Beyond amazement, I was distressed by the relentless banality, not to say incoherence, of the President’s replies in interviews.’ (p. 579) . . .”

“Still, I conclude that, despite these flaws, our country was in much better shape when he left office than when he was inaugurated. He played a key role in ending the Cold War, raised the country’s spirits and laid the groundwork for the prosperity we’re now enjoying. And his heart was always in the right place. Even when he went wrong, he meant well.”

“. . . And your observations about the Reagan *family*:

—First wife Jane Wyman’s ‘divorce suit stated that RR had inflicted “grievous mental suffering” upon JW with his incessant harangues about politics (p.746).’ Moreover, she went around town saying he was a bore in bed (p. 262).

—“His children ‘are a dissimilar group, divided between two mothers, united only by their starved love for Ronald Reagan. . . . He was always a remote father.’ Michael ‘used to be proud of his father’s nickname for him, *schmuck*, until he looked it up in a Yiddish dictionary (pp. 417–418).’ Michael wrote a book titled *On the Outside Looking In* which he maintains that at his high school graduation, Reagan came up to him and said, ‘Hi, my name’s Ronald Reagan. What’s yours?.’ Maureen sighed ‘I’ve never really *been* with him;’ young Ron . . . ‘held up a finger and thumb, millimeters apart. “I love my dad, but our relationship is about this deep” (p. 565);’ and Patti Davis, who changed her name as a gesture of independence, also wrote a book—*The Way I See It* —‘which has been neglected by Reagan scholars, but it is an important document that shows the dark side of RR’s cool moon. Its portrait of an abusive, domineering NR is far more damaging than Kitty Kelley’s *Nancy Reagan* because the material is primary

(p.783).’ You seem to agree: ‘In a town famous for its coldness. . . . Nancy will soon be feared by many as an operator *par excellence* . . . she seems to have inherited . . . [her surgeon stepfather’s] conviction that all human behavior can be controlled, if necessary by cutting (p. 416),’ And ‘The importance the senior Reagans attached to Cameron [Michael’s son, their only grandchild] can be gauged from their failure to stop by the hospital the day he was born, even though he lay in a hospital minutes from the freeway they were taking to Rancho de Cielo . . . RR did not manage to see his grandson until July, 1980, when the boy was more than two’ (p.784).”

“Well, I make no pretense that the Reagans were a model family. But Nancy has devoted her life to Dutch—that relationship is real.”

“Your New Year’s Eve 1988 diary entry on Reagan’s character really sums it up well:

‘Out of Tampico’s [Reagan’s Illinois birthplace] ice there grew, crystal by crystal, the glacier that is Ronald Reagan: an ever-thrusting, ever-deepening mass of chill purpose. Possessed of no inner warmth save in its own growth, it directed itself toward whatever declivities lay in its path’ (p. 640).”

“There you go again! That passage finishes: ‘Yet . . . men will still ponder Dutch’s improbable progress, and write on their cards, *How big he was! How far he came! And how deep the valley he carved!*’”

“And as you watched him get ready for his Presidential farewell speech, you wrote in your diary: ‘He sits down and at once begins to stare at the monitor, waiting for his image—his real self—to pop up’ (p. 647).”

“OK, OK! So you’re going to pan me for betraying my subject?”

“*Au contraire!* I think it’s to your credit that you called it as you saw it and didn’t succumb to the charm of your authorized subject.”

“So you liked ‘*Dutch*’ after all?”

“It’s very enlightening in many ways. But I have a problem with some of the things it *doesn’t* discuss. For example, the

index shows no entries for ‘African-Americans,’ ‘blacks’ or even ‘Negroes,’ ‘Hispanics,’ ‘civil rights,’ ‘race relations,’ ‘poverty,’ or ‘education’. You’d think a tome this length about a man who served eight years as Governor of California and eight more in the White House would have *some* discussion of these.”

“Well, I never heard much discussion of them among the Reaganauts either.”

“In that case, I’d have liked to learn *why* these issues got so little attention and what the consequences were of that inattention.”

“You’re getting pretty picky. Let’s cut to the chase. How did you like my new technique of creating fictional personae for myself and some relatives and friends so we could ‘first-hand report’ on Dutch’s progress even when we weren’t actually there?”

“Well, that technique certainly improves readability, but I had to spend a lot of time referring back to your list of interviews to try to puzzle out whether the details I was reading came from real witnesses or from your imagination. Still, it may not be inappropriate to use a Hollywood technique in the biography of a movie star president.”

“If you’re so suspicious of my technique, why are you using it in this review? You know this conversation never took place!”

“But it *seemed* so real! And like Dutch, I meant well.”

SHELDON APPLETON