

In retrospect, says Jason A. Keenan, Ronald Reagan shook the world.

Life of a political giant

Biography is a most difficult of arts. The lone writer must try to capture the complexities of another individual, collect the ephemera and scraps of a life and turn them into a coherent reflection of the entire person.

The task is doubly hard when the subject is a giant, a figure in history who dominates his or her time. Any character that big is sure to generate big feelings — large loathing or immense admiration and almost anything in between.

To make matters even more difficult, Edmund Morris was close to his subject, appointed as official biographer to the 40th president of the United States. A constant struggle to be objective, yet offer an inside glimpse, is always there.

Morris rises to the task admirably in *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (Random House, 874 pages, \$49.95). The book has been hit with a flurry of controversy since it was released late last year. Reagan purists have attacked it as an unkind portrait. Historians have labelled the book a sham.

Academics attacked *Dutch* because of Morris's non-historical approach. Rather than a traditional biography there are elements of fiction woven into the story. While the Dutch character at centre stage rings true (and the introduction insists that all lines spoken by him are true), Morris inserts himself — a half made-up character of the former President's boyhood and half official biographer with a glimpse into the real working of the 1980s White House.

This novel approach was brave. But it only comes with mixed success. The real part is great and imaginative, the made up character can get tiresome. Given the sweep of Reagan's life from successful actor (he was top of the box office before he became the B-grade actor so made fun of in later life), union president, political speaker, and politician, Morris's made-up character disappears at times. The glimpses offered into Reagan's life leave one wanting so much more of the real man, and less of the narrator.

The former president was a simple yet complex man. He was the Great Communicator, yet he had strained relations with everyone around him — except his second wife Nancy. He called the Soviet Union an evil empire, to much controversy and condemnation, yet was the one who brought an end to Cold War conflict with that nation. Reagan, simply put, is a simple riddle with a complex answer.

So to is *Dutch*, released more than a decade after Reagan left America's Oval Office. Even that span of time presents a problem. It allows some distance to foster the feeling of history. Yet it's too short a span, even yet, to allow people to feel separated what many will look back on as the greatest era of the late 20th Century.

Critics will rely on the barbs and images of that era. Supporters will look back at someone who stood firm and shook the world with his simple beliefs. The

monolith of Communism weakened, cracked, and fell when it ran into Reagan. And an economic miracle was unleashed in the United States, and left the whole world trying to catch up to the greatest growth in prosperity the world has ever seen.

Dutch offers a compelling yet incomplete portrait of a man, a snapshot leaving us wishing we could see the full panorama. That, it seems, will be left to another biographer.



Jason A. Keenan

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