

Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan

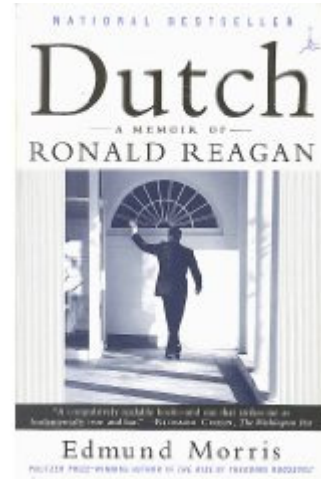
Edmund Morris
1999, Random House

When Edmund Morris's book *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* came out, as an admirer of Ronald Reagan I plopped down a formidable amount of cash, eager to read this book by The President's "authorized biographer." After I had gotten about a quarter of the way into it, somewhat confused by its style, I read some reviews of *Dutch: A memoir of Ronald Reagan* in *The National Review*. What I read there, made me wonder about the monetary and time investments I had made. Nevertheless, bolstered by William F. Buckley's admonition to read it through, I read on and was rewarded at last.

I have a plaque on the wall of my office cubicle that bears the rather New Age bromide, "Others Are Merely Mirrors of You." To me, books are rather like people. This comes as no surprise, since they emanate *from* people. Even a chronicler of another person's life can't help but color his writings with the pigments of his inner landscape. Morris often points to what he sees as Reagan's lack of real depth. I get the impression that this liberal sophist cannot come to terms with a man who has a simple (but not simplistic), yet firm moral resolve. To Morris, even a person's moral convictions are open to reinterpretation depending upon the prevailing circumstances. Ironically, in his own way, Morris is very like the Ronald Reagan he describes—a man with a lack of real depth.

That's not to say Morris isn't an adept wordsmith, for he has a talent for neat turns of phrase and dry humor that makes *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* eminently readable. My biggest gripe is the fiction device Morris uses to insert himself and other made up characters into Reagan's past. He manufactures a fictitious American history for himself (he's from South Africa), along with a fictitious cast of characters and situations to make it seem he's Reagan's contemporary. I find it jarring and confusing. You don't know whether you're reading a fact or a fictitious rambling. From about page 326 on (it's a long book), however, Morris drops the device almost completely and the book takes an upward turn. The highlights of the book are President Reagan's dealings with the "Evil Empire" (the Soviet Union) and his courage in dealing with Alzheimer's. Here, Morris describes with poignancy the character of the man whose life he has set out to chronicle.

In the last two chapters, Morris seems to come to terms with a man he never really understood and whom he actually admires—Ronald Wilson Reagan. In spite of his decidedly different worldview as compared to Reagan's, Morris balances the good and the bad with surprising equanimity. Confronted with a man he cannot understand, he comes to the conclusion that the subject of his biography was indeed one of our greatest Presidents. By the time I turned the last page of *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, I realized that my own admiration for Ronald Reagan had been bolstered. To me, he was indeed a great president and a great man, with more class and bonhomie than any two men could possess. That Reagan is at heart a simple man with simple convictions doesn't



matter one whit. Whatever the lofty position any individual is thrust into, at the core that person is but a human being—with all the positive and negative baggage that entails.

While I personally feel that the *definitive* biography of Ronald Wilson Reagan still yearns to be written, Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* fills in a lot of *terra incognita*. This book makes me long for a biography worthy of a man who ennobled the Presidency just by occupying it, yet who would not remove his suit jacket out of respect for the office. Yet, until that book is written, Morris's memoir about our 40th president will provide some memorable moments.