

Edmund Morris, Reagan Biographer Who Upset Conventions, Dies at 78

By David Stout

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Edmund Morris, who wrote an acclaimed biography of Theodore Roosevelt but is best known for his life of Ronald Reagan, in which the author inserted himself as a fictional narrator, a device that baffled and angered some historians, died on Friday in Danbury, Conn. He was 78.

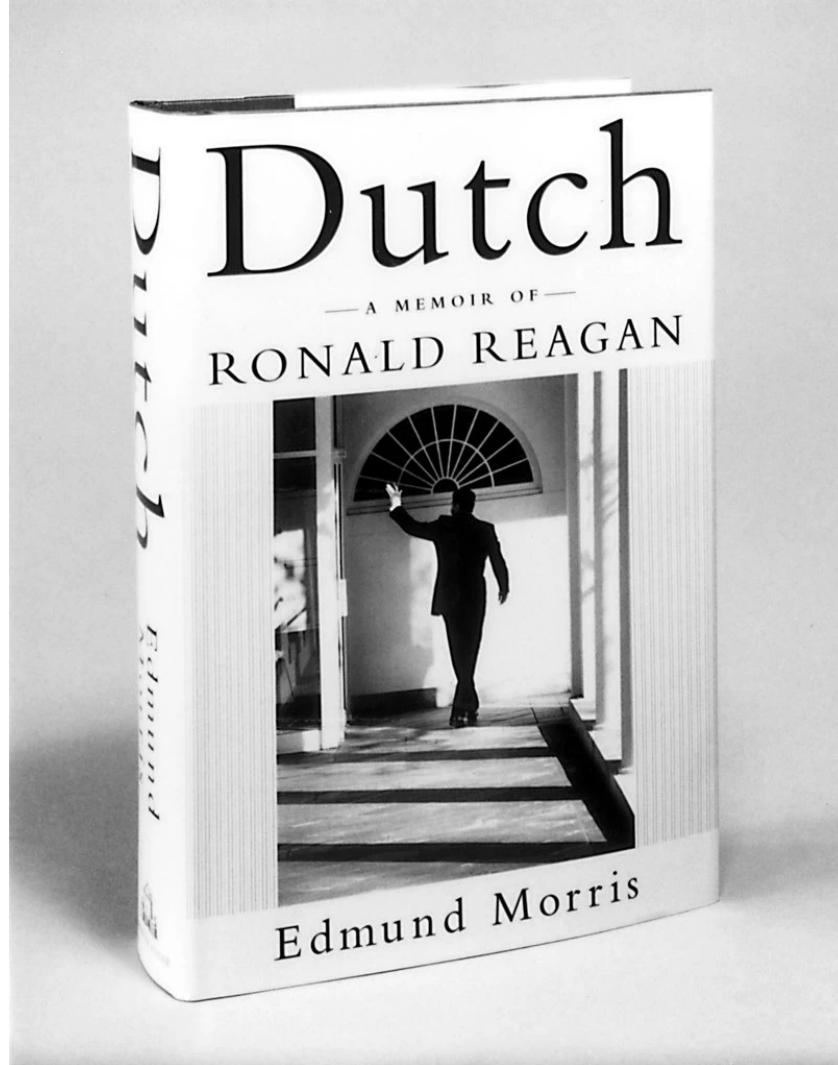
His death, at a hospital following a stroke on Thursday, was confirmed on Monday by his wife, the author Sylvia Jukes Morris. He lived in Kent, Conn.

Mr. Morris's "The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt" won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award in 1980. He followed that with two more well-received books on the 26th president, "Theodore Rex" (2001) and "Colonel Roosevelt" (2010).

But "Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan" is the work for which he is best known. Published in 1999 to much anticipation (he had been working on it for 14 years), it was told from the viewpoint of a fictional Edmund Morris, who accompanies the future president from his Illinois boyhood, through his Eureka College days in Illinois, and finally to the White House and beyond.

"I quite understand that readers will have to adjust, at first, to what amounts to a new biographical style," Mr. Morris wrote on the website of Random House, his publisher. "But the revelations of this style, which derive directly from Ronald Reagan's own way of looking at his life, are I think rewarding enough to convince them that one of the most interesting characters in recent American history looms here like a colossus."

Some critics found Mr. Morris's approach fitting for a president — and former actor — who occasionally confused reality with cinema. In at least two instances, for example, Reagan cited words evoking American military heroism as if the words had come from the Pentagon — when, in fact, they were snippets from Hollywood movies made decades before.



Mr. Morris's biography of Reagan won praise but also scorn, for its use of a fictional device. Mr. Morris said it reflected his interests in "character, narrative, the strangeness of reality."

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, writing in *The New York Times*, praised "Dutch" as highly readable, with passages that were "exciting and at times, even inspiring."

"Couldn't all this have been accomplished without Mr. Morris's narrative abracadabra?" Mr. Lehmann-Haupt asked. "Perhaps, but I can think of few conventional political biographies that bring their subjects' pasts so richly alive."

But some historians and commentators were disdainful. The columnist George Will attacked "Dutch" as "dishonorable," and the historian Alan Brinkley called it "bizarre," adding, "This is a very particular genre, biography, and it has a long tradition and a very narrow and restricted set of conventions."

One of his toughest critics, Michiko Kakutani of *The Times*, called the book a "loony hodgepodge of fact and fiction" about a president that mimicked "the very blurring of reality and state-managed illusion that that president was often accused of perpetrating."

For his part Mr. Morris readily agreed with those who said he did not deserve to be called a historian. In an interview on C-Span several years ago, he said historians were "a different breed of cat" and that, unlike them, he was not particularly interested in politics and government. Rather, he said, he was interested in

“character, narrative, the strangeness of reality.”

His critics complained that Mr. Morris had been given an unparalleled opportunity, having been granted full access to Reagan, and that he had squandered it with a technique that was not just unorthodox but, for a true historian, also unforgivable.

Mr. Morris's award-winning first book on Theodore Roosevelt caught the attention of the Reagan White House, which sought him out to write Reagan's biography, free of any editorial control by the administration.

In researching the book Mr. Morris had been allowed to sit in on White House staff meetings, review presidential papers, talk to the president's wife, Nancy Reagan, and their children. And he had been promised that there would be no attempts at editorial control, even though the book was an authorized biography.

The project had its beginnings at a Washington dinner in the early 1980s given by Senator Mark O. Hatfield, Republican of Oregon, in his Georgetown home. The honored guests were President and Nancy Reagan. Others in attendance included Mr. Morris and at least three historians.

As the attendees dined on lemon piccata chicken, the historians discussed the difficulties of documenting a presidency. They urged the Reagans to save every scrap of paper and to recall the thoughts that had led to their actions, Mr. Hatfield recalled later, according to a Times account.

Exactly how and when Reagan settled on Mr. Morris to tell his story is not clear. What is clear is that Mr. Morris's first book on Theodore Roosevelt had attracted the attention of legacy-minded Reagan administration officials and supporters.

“I think Edmund is a superb writer,” Michael K. Deaver, a former top Reagan aide, said in 1998. “If you look at his Theodore Roosevelt biography, it’s beautifully written.”

The prestige that Mr. Morris acquired from the Roosevelt biography, plus the promised access to Reagan, were enough to land Mr. Morris a \$3 million advance from Random House for a Reagan biography (the equivalent of about \$4.7 million today). The editors at Random House had to wait as Mr. Morris, writing in long hand on yellow-lined paper with green-ink fountain pens, toiled year after year. “Writers always think they’re going to be finished before they are,” he said as the book was finally nearing completion.

Mr. Morris signed a copy of his biography, “Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan,” after a talk in Washington in 1999. His wife, the author Sylvia Jukes Morris, was with him.

Larry Downing/Reuters

The furor over “Dutch” may have hurt the book’s sales, which fell off after an initial spurt. Later, in addition to the second and third books on Roosevelt, he wrote biographies of Beethoven (2005) and Thomas Edison (to be published in October).

Mr. Morris trained as a concert pianist in his younger years, an ambition he later abandoned. But he remained a skilled pianist. His friend the writer Gay Talese recalled in an interview on Monday that Mr. Morris once punctuated a book-reading for his Beethoven biography at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan by playing snatches of the composer’s music.

Arthur Edmund Morris was born in Nairobi, Kenya, on May 27, 1940, to Eric and May Morris, who were South Africans. His father was an airline pilot. Edmund studied literature, art and music at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. He left college in 1961 to work in the advertising department of a men's clothing store in Durban, South Africa, composing brochures and ads. He said the work had influenced his literary style.

He moved to Britain in 1964 and worked there as a copywriter in an American advertising agency. He married Sylvia Jukes, an English teacher at the time, in 1966. They moved to the United States in 1968. Ms. Morris said it was their writing a series of travelogue cassettes for TWA that kindled their interest in history.

Ms. Morris has written a two-part biography of Clare Boothe Luce, the American writer-journalist, politician and diplomat, and a biography of Edith Kermit Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt's second wife. In addition to her, Mr. Morris is survived by a brother, Roy, and a sister, Judy Davidowitz.

As for his unconventional technique in "Dutch," Mr. Morris said he had decided upon it because he wasn't sure he could explain Reagan's personality by orthodox methods. Even admirers of the 40th president have been struck by his contradictions. He was amiable, yet had few close friends. He projected old-fashioned family values, yet his own family was sometimes dysfunctional.

"He was truly one of the strangest men who's ever lived," Mr. Morris said in a "60 Minutes" interview with Lesley Stahl. "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.' "

Correction: May 28, 2019

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this obituary misstated the subject of a biography by Sylvia Jukes Morris, Mr. Morris's wife. It is Edith Kermit Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt's second wife, not Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Based on information supplied by the family, the obituary also misstated the given name of Mr. Morris's surviving brother. It is Roy, not Eric.

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.

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