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## Morris Against History

The Book Historians Love to Denounce

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Edmund Morris has just slapped the historical profession upside the head with a wet mackerel.

Like most professions, it takes itself very seriously. But it often has doubts about what it is, where it's going, and whether the wider world pays it enough attention.

An occupation that once sang the praises of great leaders and their tribes, it today eschews all that; in fact, if anything, it has a muckraking tendency. But above all, it strives to approximate laboratory science.

Modern historians endeavor to prove things, testing hypotheses with carefully noted evidence. At least, that is the ideal. Indeed, some stray when they write on topics they feel strongly about.

Some Cold War revisionists, for example, twisted evidence mercilessly, using part of a quotation, for instance, that helped prove a point and throwing away the rest that might cast doubt upon it. A British historian remarked that they sounded like prosecuting attorneys, with the US government in the dock.

But eventually other historians, especially Robert J. Maddox, pounced on them,

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highlighting their errors, and history continued pursuing its scientific ideal. In fact, some historians have turned to numbers more than narrative to prove hypotheses. Robert W. Fogel and Douglass C. North rank high in this category, sharing a Nobel economics prize in 1993 for their histories.

Whatever their approach, however, professional historians believe their primary purpose is to inform as accurately as possible, not to propagandize and not simply to entertain. Their work can, of course, be a good read, but that is just an added benefit. In fact, much of it is so tediously written it could be used to punish felons. And there is an astonishing amount of it.

The two great historical associations in the United States, the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, each produce quarterly publications that review close to 600 books a year.

Now, into the midst of all this science-like effort, with historians practically wearing white coats, sallies Edmund Morris, claiming he has found a really powerful way to demonstrate historical truth--through fiction!

Coolly and brazenly Morris and his publishers, Random House, admit he has laced his authorized biography of Ronald Reagan, *Dutch*, with fictitious people and events, dribbling them throughout like a literary Jackson Pollack. And he wants this book--a prodigious one, incidentally, 847 pages--to be taken seriously, as indeed it has been by some prominent reviewers.

Now, history has long been the subject of fiction, a noble and well-loved genre, but the Daphne du Mauriers and C. S. Foresters of the world claim only that their novels tell good stories, although often based on solid historical research and frequently illuminating the human condition. The outrageous thing about Morris is that he has blended fact and fiction with the primary intention, not of entertaining, but of informing, just as much as Fogel and North with their numbers and graphs.

Morris, however, is not the first to catapult a boulder at the fortress of contemporary historiography. But the greatest assaults

occurred in other media, film and television. And what can you expect from Hollywood? The television series "Roots" and Oliver Stone's films on Richard Nixon and especially John F. Kennedy drew howls from historians for what they claimed were gross inaccuracies.

But even in the more sacred media of the bound book there have already been barbarian incursions. Bob Woodward regularly quotes statements from meetings and phone calls he was not a party to and for which he cites no verbatim record. But he knows what transpired in those meetings, so what's the problem?

Well, for one thing, officials' language helps define them--Kennedy's brittle wit, Nixon's gross profanity, Clinton's wonkish musings. Doesn't truth take a hit, if an author concocts their words?

Furthermore, with Morris, the reader can have difficulty distinguishing reality from fiction. Historians often paraphrase Lucan, saying they advance upon the shoulders of predecessors. But if one were to base further work on Morris's biography, one would have to be very careful to be standing upon real shoulders and not just fictional padding.

Endless doubts can be raised about trying to reconstruct the past faithfully. For example, can four-dimensional phenomena possibly be resurrected on two dimensional pages? Furthermore, don't words lack literal meaning, as some linguists claim? And, since historians can't put everything in, don't their choices alter reality? For that matter, what is reality anyway, in the present, much less the past?

Paradoxically perhaps, I agree about the futility of faithful historical re-creation, while applauding attempts to achieve it. I like works of history delineated as realistically as possible. For historical fiction, I will turn to Patrick O'Brian or one of the other great, and avowed, historical fabricators.

Incidentally, history written with realism and accuracy in mind can be enthralling. The works of Stephen Ambrose and James M. McPherson come to mind. Those authors pick good subjects, research them thoroughly, and write them superbly. That is my kind of history. Am I just old-fashioned?

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