

The Large Book versus the Small

A Presidential Historian's Consideration of Three Recent Biographies

ROBERT H. FERRELL

Ours seems to be the time of the large book, those huge bestsellers that cover the tables in bookstores across the country. The biographical volumes among these books might be described as “lives and times.” They are written in such an exquisite amount of detail that they present a challenge to readers, both scholarly and non. Older scholars like myself find the books of younger historians piling up around us, and we wonder where we might find time to read such a flood. Confronting an eight-hundred-page biography, and calculating twenty to twenty-five pages per hour for reading, each of these onrushing books would require thirty or forty hours of time. Unless, that is, we skimmed; whereupon we could respond positively to the queries of younger colleagues as to whether we had read the latest scholarship. We had—that is, we had scampered through several hundred pages in an hour, or maybe two or three.

The trend toward the dominance of the large book in historical biography is, in my judgment, radically wrong. But it does have a history, and understanding something of the context of today's over-long historical

Robert H. Ferrell is professor emeritus of history at Indiana University Bloomington.

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blockbusters may help to make more sense of the books under consideration in this review essay. The first generation of scholars to produce these large books did so under the influence of the late Samuel Eliot Morison, Harvard professor and dean of post-World-War-II American historians. Not long after the war, in which Morison served as a naval officer, he produced (albeit with many assiduous assistants) a huge, fifteen-volume account of the Navy from the beginning of the war until the end.¹ During the same period Morison also wrote one of his most trenchant essays, "History as a Literary Art," in which he decried the "dull, solid, valuable monographs" published pre-1945.² Published and republished, for a time distributed free of charge at historical conferences, the essay had an almost immediate effect. Young scholars, among them Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Frank Freidel, and Arthur S. Link, went to work on multivolume biographies.³ Although their admiring peers seemed not to notice, these writers were too ambitious; none of the three finished the series that he had set out to write. Nevertheless, their work set a pattern for scholarly historical writing in subsequent decades. Morison's admonitions for color and dash in historical writing were to the good, but he left a more dubious legacy in the flood of large books and multivolume chronicles that followed.

Why does the flood of bestsellers (as publishers are quick to denominate them) persist today? The first fault lies with scholarly authors and the tools of their profession. Word processors have virtually taken over the composition process. With the ability to produce beautiful copy, and to transpose sentences or paragraphs without a telltale mark, computer software can fool a writer into thinking that what looks right is right. Today's authors also have a much greater temptation to overwrite and then to bypass the time-consuming process of cutting and editing one's prose. Where one handwritten page might have done, five quickly typed pages will now do better; first drafts come to be regarded as fifth drafts.⁴

¹Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, 15 vols. (Boston, 1947–1962).

²Samuel Eliot Morison, "History as a Literary Art," in *Sailor Historian: The Best of Samuel Eliot Morison*, ed. Emily Morison Beck (Boston, 1977), 383–93.

³Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt* (3 vols., Boston, 1957–); Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (4 vols., Boston, 1952–); Arthur S. Link, *Wilson* (5 vols., Princeton, N.J., 1947–).

⁴My friend John Lukacs, author of some twenty-five books, told me recently of losing an entire chapter of text after switching from his typewriter to a word processor. Lukacs gave the machine away and found an IBM typewriter to take its place.

The nature of historical narrative also seems to confound many of today's authors. Anyone who attempts to write a biography knows that many points in the story require background description. Such pages can pile up in a hurry; all too often, they may duplicate information already in other books, be grossly repetitive, and add little or nothing to the store of historical knowledge.

The second fault lies with the bookselling chain stores, which have created a new class of book buyers—the perusers. These individuals, who purchase books by word-of-mouth, cover art, or size, hesitate to pay \$30 for a book of two hundred pages when they might get five times as many pages for the same amount. They want to be able to turn pages until they find particular points of interest; they surf through books in the same way they move through web screens and television programs.

Finally, big books are encouraged by the insatiable demand of colleges and universities for scholars to publish in order to obtain tenure and promotion. Committees see a blockbuster biography listed on a curriculum vitae as a major accomplishment; a small book, it is often assumed, could and should have been published as a journal article. No one on the committee may have read the large book, but their assumptions govern the decision to tenure or promote.

Consider, in that light, the three books that follow. All of them reinforce the above arguments in one way or another. All are recent biographies of presidents—Richard M. Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Ronald Reagan. The first two are recent hardcover publications; the last was published in hardcover several years ago and is now available in paperback.

Iwan Morgan's *Nixon* is the smallest of the three, a mere 228 pages, including the index. Its one-word title is a preview of the book, which is short and written to the subject. Morgan's chapters reinforce this: reputation, character, elephant man (a delightful description), American Disraeli (surely a sign of the author's English background), cold warrior, world statesman, imperial president, and conclusion. The book is a setpiece, written to order as part of a series that includes biographies of Thomas More, Oliver Cromwell, and Louis XVI. It may have been targeted to busy Britons who need a book to put in a pocket and read on the bus or train.

Morgan's name may be familiar to *IMH* readers as an author and former member of the journal's editorial board; it will, undeservedly, ring fewer bells among the majority of American historians. He deserves wider recognition, for he writes clearly and well. His book is pithy; it gathers its points into quick summaries. If a reader wishes to know what this president was like, here are most of the answers. Yes, Morgan's picture tends to

the black and white. He offers no grand new interpretation, but he brings in the subtleties and draws his conclusions convincingly.⁵ This is an extraordinarily knowledgeable book and contains only a single misidentification: Nixon official Alexander Butterfield, who revealed the existence of the oval office tapes, is here given the first name Herbert. Morgan's writing displays a sure sense for words, and in only one place has American jargon entered in, this in his affection for the term "prioritize" (used six times). Apart from this, the volume is one of the tightest and most thoughtful biographies of recent years.

The longest of the books under review is Robert A. Caro's *Master of the Senate*, the third volume in his *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.⁶ This book of 1,167 pages requires no review in detail, for its size speaks for it. Indeed, the Caro volume stands as the best possible example of the large book among recent presidential biographies. It is a life and times book; it does not center on Johnson, and herein lies the trouble. Johnson's presidency was important in the history of the United States. But should a volume covering Johnson's years in the Senate read as a history of the U. S. Senate, as this book does?⁷ A reader whose time is limited cannot read a book requiring sixty hours of attention (as Caro's third volume does). It is possible to leaf such a volume, reading the topic sentences, surveying the book's contents as if from above, and only descend into the woods—the actual contents of the paragraphs—when the aerial view proves sufficiently exciting.

Moving through the book in such a manner and stopping at a randomly chosen page, the reader sees, in a chapter-ending paragraph, a discussion of Johnson's relationship with his fellow senator Hubert Humphrey in the early days of their Senate careers. Humphrey was a liberal; Johnson

⁵IMH readers may be interested in Morgan's references to the works of scholars with Indiana University connections: Joan Hoff, formerly a member of the history faculty, and Irwin Gellman, who received his doctorate in history in 1970. For their work on Nixon, see Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York, 1994); Irwin F. Gellman, *The Contender: Richard Nixon, the Congress Years, 1946–1952* (New York, 1999).

⁶The author plans a fourth, and he claims, final volume on his subject. But how he will shoehorn Johnson's presidency into a single volume, when he has already published three leading up to it, is a mystery, already raised by many reviewers.

⁷Recently another biographer has written on a different president, proposing to show how the Senate of another era was organized and to give new understanding to his subject who, like Johnson, came out of the Senate into the presidency. See Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York, 1995).

still conservative. Humphrey had learned to compromise; Johnson might well have moved then to Humphrey's point of view, leaguing up with him and his supporters, but Johnson calculated that the move was not yet profitable. Caro uses a full paragraph for what he could have said in six words: "Johnson did not find Humphrey useful." Such self-indulgent writing is typical of Caro; he seems to believe that anything he writes will be of interest.

The book to end all books in its self-indulgence, however, is Edmund Morris's *Dutch*, a 1999 biography of Ronald Reagan. Morris, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (1979), spent fourteen years writing this biography. He received first access to Reagan's private papers, traveled with the ex-president and his wife, and conducted many interviews with both. Published by Knopf with sizable advances, the book was widely anticipated. Its reception admittedly was mixed, but testimonies in favor abounded. The publisher has gathered a small number of these on the end cover and, in a note to the paperback edition, admits the mixed reception but maintains that the book is a "page-turner."

If most of the large books of recent times have little excuse for being, the 874-page Morris memoir has the least of all of them. It is an embarrassment to its author, who comes across as someone without the slightest understanding of why readers would buy the book—that is, to know more about Ronald Reagan. Not to know more about the man's times, for so many other books have filled us in on the period, but to learn something of Reagan.

In such a lengthy tome, Morris often ignores or misses interesting details. To this reader Reagan's papers said little about his early life, at least the years prior to 1937 when he went to Hollywood. Here a book by Stephen Vaughn⁸ (*Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics*, 1994) offers a positive example, for Vaughn has ferreted out detail that Morris apparently missed. Vaughn writes, for example, of Reagan's youthful romance with a fellow resident of Dixon, Illinois. "Mugs" was the daughter of the minister of Dixon's Christian (Disciples of Christ) church, which Reagan also attended. The two knew each other well and eventually became engaged, but then went their separate ways. Morris does include a photograph of Mugs, her round face surrounded by dark curls, and the illustration says more than Morris's flat portrayal: this was a pretty girl who got away.

⁸Vaughn received his doctorate in history from Indiana University Bloomington in 1977.

Morris's portrayal of the Midwest, including Dixon, is condescending. His description of the cornfields that stretched out from the town in the 1920s and 1930s seems meant to say that the people of Dixon were corn-fed. He thinks the town arid—but then so are parts of many small towns and large urban centers. He also pokes fun at Dixon's churchgoers. In about that same time, I attended church in Bowling Green and Deshler, Ohio, and in the even smaller towns of Custar and Milton Center. These good places and people deserve better than to be the objects of Morris's condescending humor. Nor is it amusing to read of the narrowness of Eureka College when Mugs and "Ronnie" were there; all of us have seen and know such institutions. They were different from Yale and Harvard and Princeton, but they had their virtues—students and teachers worked hard, sometimes succeeding and sometimes not. My parents graduated in the Wooster College (Ohio) class of 1915. Their class of fewer than forty people included the Compton brothers (one a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and the other a president of Massachusetts Institute of Technology), a president of General Electric, and a nationally known oil geologist.

All of the above says nothing of the incessant interventions of Morris's special literary device—his now infamous "other self," an invented character who is a contemporary of his subject and hence can act as observer. This character is a self-conscious writer who marries a violist and has a son who attends the University of California at Berkeley (which gives the author a chance to relate the riots at that school, an episode that, having nothing to do either with learning or free speech, is best left forgotten). As governor of California, Reagan had to deal with the conflicts at Berkeley, but it is disturbing to read about them from the perspective of Morris's invented son.

A final liability of this book is its profanity. The words are still shocking to see in print; they are painfully explicit in regard to things all readers know about and need no reminders of. They are, in a word, not literary.

Some comment on my own work may be necessary here, lest I be accused of similar self-indulgence. It is true that I have published several large books. One, *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman*, was also a bestseller. It brought together something less than half of what I believe were the most remarkable letters ever written by a president of the United States: 1,268 letters (all but one handwritten), discursive, honest, and brisk. The material was brand new, found in the Truman house in Independence—under sofa cushions, in closets, in books, and in the attic where both pigeons and raccoons had gotten in (the latter, having eaten the pigeons, then discovered jars of jam, which they opened, smearing

letters with both feathers and jam). Given a similar opportunity, I would do the book again. Another big book was a diplomatic history of the United States that served as a course textbook. A third book, part of the New American Nation series and fairly large at 346 pages, covered Woodrow Wilson and the First World War. For that I undertook to see as much material, unpublished as well as published, as possible; the book was the result of wide-ranging use of historical manuscript collections across the country. So there have been times when I have felt the need to produce long works in order to do justice to an historical subject.⁹

For the rest of it I have long since reverted to monographs, now numbering ten or more, about subjects that I consider important and novel. How Truman got along, honorably, with Thomas J. Pendergast and nearly lost his Senate seat in 1940, whereupon he would have passed into obscurity. How Truman received the Democratic nomination for vice-president in 1944 and hence became president of the United States. How Franklin D. Roosevelt, dying of heart failure, could not resist a fourth term and took it, irresponsibly, when he was of good mind but so short of concentration time (ten minutes) that he should have retired. How Warren G. Harding died two deaths: one his physical death (from a heart attack and not a stroke, as his physicians announced), and the other the death of his reputation, done in by everyone who refused to read the sources. (Calvin Coolidge once said about book reviewing that he always tried to review a book before he read it, for otherwise it might prejudice his review.)¹⁰

More recently I have turned to edited books (three) and monographs (three) on World War I, the five-day collapse of the 35th Division (Truman's division), the Lost Battalion, and the great battle of the Meuse-Argonne, the largest and most costly battle in all American history to the present writing.¹¹

⁹Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910–1959* (New York, 1983); Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History* (New York, 1959, 1969, 1975, 1987); Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson and World War I, 1917–1921* (New York, 1985).

¹⁰Robert H. Ferrell, *Truman and Pendergast* (Columbia, Mo., 1999); Ferrell, *Choosing Truman: The Democratic Convention of 1944* (Columbia, Mo., 1994); Ferrell, *The Dying President: Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1944–1945* (Columbia, Mo., 1998); Ferrell, *The Strange Deaths of President Harding* (Columbia, Mo., 1996).

¹¹See, for example, Robert H. Ferrell, *Collapse at Meuse-Argonne: The Failure of the Missouri-Kansas Division* (Columbia, Mo., 2004). 1.2 million Americans fought at the Meuse-Argonne; 26,000 died, twice as many as at Okinawa in 1945.

The art and craft of writing history is far from dead, and even the field of presidential biography will attest to this. Iwan Morgan's clear and succinct biography of Nixon, Stephen Vaughn's monograph on Reagan's years in Hollywood, and works by other up-and-coming scholars are both readable and well worth the time it takes to read them. Too often, however, the decision to follow Morison's call for a new literary history has served as a license to excess and self-indulgence. Writing a large book, when a monograph would suffice, is a regrettable trend amongst biographers of the last half of the twentieth century. It is to be hoped that scholars of the new century will proceed with greater sensitivity toward the reader who is, after all, the ultimate reason for any book's existence.

