Ronald Reagan: American Icon
by Iwan Morgan
IB Tauris, 320 pages, £20

One of Ronald Reagan’s first speaking engagements after winning the Republican nomination in 1980 was at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi. This might have been a fairly conventional campaign event were it not for Neshoba’s place in the dark history of American racial violence. It was there, in the ‘Freedom Summer’ of 1964, that Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman – three young volunteers who had come to register black voters – were murdered. Their mutilated bodies were discovered only a few miles from where Reagan spoke.

Sixteen years was not so long a time. Federal law agents believed that the local community was still protecting some of those guilty of the murders. Reagan could have spoken about the importance of civil rights to the white folks of Philadelphia, Mississippi. But he didn’t. He spoke about states’ rights instead. The crowd, wearing their Ronald Reagan ‘Let’s Make America Great Again’ buttons, approved.

The Washington Post editorial the next day called the Republican candidate’s remarks “chilling” and asked: “Is Reagan saying that he intends to do everything he can to turn the clock back to Mississippi justice of 1964?”

How important is this episode in the long, eventful life of a man who, as Iwan Morgan rightly says, did so much to shape his country and the world in the 20th century? Morgan describes the speech as “insensitive” – which it certainly was. Quite reasonably, he gives far more coverage to Reagan’s role in bringing to an end the Cold War and to his fiscal policy than to one speech in an unfortunate location. Morgan gives Reagan considerable credit not just for having the imagination to seize the opportunity presented by Gorbachev, but also for having been right all along about the advantages of building up military strength.

But Reagan knew what he was doing in Neshoba County. The winning smile and cheery optimism were genuine, but so too was Reagan’s conviction that, since at least the 1960s, the government had grown out of control and that something essential about American freedom had been diminished as a result. In 1964 Reagan had been one of a new America’s great salesman

ADAMIP SMITH on a fond but fair portrait of the Hollywood president with a genius for geniality

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Former film star Reagan controversially launches his 1980 presidential campaign near the spot where three civil rights activists were murdered

Reagan of course was successful not in spite of being an actor but because of it
breed of conservative Republicans who had opposed the Civil Rights Act as an unwarranted expansion of federal power. Iwan Morgan is a shrewd and enormously well-informed guide to the turbulent politics through which Reagan forged so surefooted a path, taking seriously Reagan’s political principles as well as his genius for geniality. This is a book filled with reasoned reflection on its subject’s significance by a master historian. But if it is fair, it is also fond. It is hard not to leave this book with at least a grudging respect for its subject. The Reagan that emerges in these pages was, above all, a supremely talented politician, who could see a big picture where others saw only difficulties and confusion.

It’s hard not to leave this book with at least a grudging respect for its subject

Reagan’s Hollywood background led political opponents to underestimate him again and again. But of course he was successful not in spite of being an actor but because of it. He knew how to gaze into a camera lens, and he had a natural performer’s instinctive understanding for what an audience wanted. Successful ‘conviction politicians’, as he showed, are not dogmatists but those who can tell a story with conviction in spite of evidence to the contrary. In the final analysis, people willingly suspended their disbelief when they listened to Ronald Reagan, as they do with all Hollywood Greats, because they wanted to believe in the dream he was selling them. He was a great salesman because he conveyed simplicity, honesty and decency.

Such a performance, though, depended on having first laid the groundwork; on having lined up friends and planted his flag. The Neshoba County fair, it turned out, was a stopping point – and I would argue a pretty revealing one – on the way to the shining city on the hill.

Adam IP Smith is a broadcaster and author of The American Civil War (Macmillan, 2007)

Shakespeare’s politics

RENE WEIS applauds a weighty exploration of how Shakespeare reflected the political realities of his time

How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays
by Peter Lake
Yale University Press, 688 pages, £25

There can be little doubt that Shakespeare’s ten history plays – ranging from the early maverick Richard III to the anti-papist King John and the abidation play Richard II, used for propaganda during the so-called Essex rebellion – reflect an intense interest in English history arising from a post-Reformation national concern with identity.

In this huge, chronologically structured study, Peter Lake coalesces the English histories with Shakespeare’s Roman plays to argue that the history plays reflect a distinct trace left by the real political manoeuvrings of the period, and he provides a wealth of historical information to underpin his case. He endorses the view, argued by others, that Falstaff’s unseemly banter with the Lord Chief Justice in Henry IV Part 2 closely echoes the reported exchanges between Sir John Oldcastle and his interrogators in the Tower. Granted that Shakespeare did originally call his fat knight ‘Oldcastle’, but does it necessarily follow that he also wanted to import the Lollard martyr’s theology? In the Henry IV plays the old reprobate revels in Luke’s parables, but he does not noticeably venture into Reformation theology.

Lake may freight the plays with too many layers of contemporary political intrigue. He develops extensive parallels between Shakespeare’s heroic soldier-king, Henry V, and the Earl of Essex, while simultaneously noting that “it would be absurd to push the connection” between them too far. Essex, the Queen’s mercurial favourite, was certainly on Shakespeare’s radar in 1599, hence the reference to Essex by the Chorus in Henry V, a play written that year for the newly opened Globe theatre. Lake’s Shakespeare is a politically committed writer whose Hamlet does more than just comment on Essex’s aborted coup of February 1601: it may be nothing short of “an intervention in the events” that ensued on Essex’s return from Ireland in 1599. For Lake this engenders a provocative reading of Troilus and Cressida as an intimate dramatic analysis of the Essex rebellion.

At times the historicised readings proposed here stretch credulity. Shakespeare’s plays are not after all acts or imaginative political parables. Even so, Lake’s single-minded take on them time and again makes the reader sit up and reconsider the extent to which Shakespeare was a man of his era. Lake’s grasp of early modern history and his detailed command of Shakespeare’s works produce an exhaustive reassessing of the canon. If at times there appear to be rather too many trees for the wood, Lake’s book nevertheless marks a refreshing and legitimate return to studying Shakespeare against the backdrop of ‘old’ rather than ‘new history’.

Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex. Lake argues that Hamlet may have influenced events surrounding his failed coup

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