

# Land of Ferguson

**IF ONE WERE TO DESCRIBE ANDREW FERGUSON'S** physical attributes, a morphed image of Kurt Vonnegut and Mark Twain comes to mind. And it is not impossible to draw similarities between literary styles, as well. Along with healthy injections of H.L. Mencken and Tom Wolfe, Ferguson is a brilliant writer: realism with an impressionistic flourish and more than a dash of irony, plus a two-quart pitcher of eloquent sarcasm. Though if one were to ask Ferguson what he thinks of any of his own works in progress, whether it be a book, a magazine article, or whatnot, he will tell you that

Andrew Ferguson joined **David Bass** for dinner at the Hay-Adams Hotel, on the site of the onetime residence of Honest Abe's private secretary John Hay, to discuss his life as a writer, reformed smoker, and Lincoln lover.

it's not very good at all. You see, Ferguson suffers from Eeyore syndrome. Historically, his colleagues and friends are quite used to hearing "not a very good article," "not a good book at all." His plentiful graying locks acting as ersatz donkey ears merely enhance the effect.

Ferguson cuts a soft, academic figure: a trim professor in a smart, light plaid suit, complete with bow tie. Today's tie selection was of the domino-themed preacher variety. But don't let his mild demeanor mislead: In fact, a past editor of his, R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr., remarked to me, "Don't let

Andy's fey style fool you. He is a man of high intelligence and erudition, with just enough balminess to make him irresistible—even on matters of public policy."

So, at 5 P.M. on a balmy Tuesday late in April, Vonnegut/Eeyore and I sat down to our dinner of champions. Though both of us were a bit jolted by this deviant dinner hour (suggested by the restaurant), we quickly warmed to a couple of Johnnie Walker Blacks and dived into discussion of his forthcoming book, *Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe's America* (Atlantic Monthly Press, \$24).

The choice of restaurant had something to do with the subject. The historic Hay-Adams, located just across Lafayette Square from the White House, sits on the site of the home of our 16th president's private secretary, John Hay. Whether or not we had any aspirations of channeling Lincoln this evening, it just seemed appropriate. The elegant Lafayette dining room and the large table centered in front of the ornate fireplace were conducive to high-minded conversation and dedicated conviviality. And at this hour, our only competition for attention was a wan geriatric fellow in a Santa Claus hat, looking something like a latter-day Grinch, lending a bit of a *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* atmosphere to our otherwise idyllic setting.

Over our Scotches, Ferguson generously offered me a piece of his nicotine gum, which I politely declined. I asked how much of the stuff he used. His reply: "I can't have a drink without poppin' one of these, so it depends how much I drink." He further related that prior to quitting smoking





ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Chilled Louisiana Coast shrimp salad with English cucumber, fresh basil leaves, and candied lemon zest; pan-roasted Black Angus beef tenderloin with green lentil and smoked bacon ragout, potato mousseline, whole-grain mustard, and madeira sauce OPPOSITE: David Bass (LEFT) and Andrew Ferguson discuss life and literature at the Hay-Adams.

seven years ago, he used to say that “the reason I can’t quit smoking is that I only smoke when I drink or write. Problem was, when I wasn’t drinking I was writing and when I wasn’t writing I was drinking.”

We waltzed through the finest avocado and crabmeat gazpacho either of us had ever tasted (alongside Sauvignon Blanc), right on through our Louisiana coast shrimp salads, a couple of pan-roasted Black Angus tenderloins (Jordan Cabernet accompanied these), to the final cheese service and 20-year-old Port. Throughout, Ferguson provided end-to-end colorful descriptions not only of his current work, but of his remarkable trajectory from ephemeral rock musician to graduate student in philosophy (“In 1980 and ’81 there was no bigger market for philosophy professors than there was for really bad bass players”), to wannabe novelist, to J school, then to *The American Spectator* and to Scripps Howard News Service, the *Washingtonian*, and on to the White House. (“In January of ’92, Bush was at 52 or 53 percent, and single-handedly through a series of really bad speeches I wrote, by March he was at 35.”) He currently resides at *The Weekly Standard*.

My initial curiosity concerned what drove our author to write about Lincoln. And by the way, he writes about Lincoln in a manner heretofore unseen. Ferguson grew up in Illinois with a childhood Lincoln fascination,

proximity helping the fixation. What sparked the current tome was a headline in the *Washington Post*: “Lincoln Statue Stirs Outrage in Richmond.” Outrage!? Lincoln?! In Ferguson’s estimation, assailing Lincoln is akin to besmirching Skippy peanut butter.

Ferguson doesn’t so much write about Lincoln as he writes about where Lincoln is today, in America and beyond. Touching and amusing stories of immigrants and foreign visitors and what the “Great President” means to them blend with grassroots political fights like the one in Richmond, and a great deal more. Lincoln in the boardroom and Lincoln on the street. Statesman. Vulgarian. Of course all of this rich and vibrant storytelling is interspersed with historical anecdotes, providing a full-bodied, satisfying experience. To use a Lincoln quote relevant to the book, “People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like.” For example, most are unaware that prior to his death, old Abe was roundly disliked. Ferguson relates a quote from his quest: “Lincoln, a man completely and utterly transformed by death. Realities were twisted and shaped to create a posthumous Superman.” Lo, I give you anew your dead president. Thus spake Lincoln’s newfound friends.

It’s no secret that a writer’s greatest attribute is his ability to turn a proper phrase. Fortunately for the reader, Ferguson turns so many of them, so well and in such rapid succession, that one’s back is constantly to the wall of his literary centrifuge. It is a good place to be.

His previous book, *Fools’ Names, Fools’ Faces*, published in 1996, is a compilation of his essays from a number of publications, and a rollicking good time. Just as I was imploring him to write more “real” books, something he said brought a glimmer to my eye. His next operation is under way: Its subject is the Beatles in America. God bless you, Andy Ferguson! ★