

Buncombe Bob; The Life and Times of Robert Rice Reynolds by Julian Pleasants.
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[Book Review]

Julian M. Pleasants.

Buncombe Bob: The Life and Times of Robert Rice Reynolds

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History seems to have almost forgotten “Buncombe Bob” Reynolds who was an enigmatic and controversial Senator from North Carolina between 1933 and 1945. For many years the final word on Senator Reynolds, was V. O. Key who in his classic study, *Southern Politics*, noted that “the erratic and irrelevant Bob Reynolds” was the only example of a clown that had held important public office in North Carolina. But Julian Pleasants’s book, *Buncombe Bob: The Life and Times of Robert Rice Reynolds*, challenges this characterization. Pleasants’s work reveals an oddly complex figure who was a mix of shrewd campaign sense, natural charm, public flamboyancy, and epicurean self-indulgence; Reynolds also exhibited fatally poor judgement in political alliances and philosophy.

Pleasants weaves a compelling narrative, exploring the core elements of Reynolds public career and private life. Within the pages of the book, Pleasants follows Reynolds’s colorful lone wolf campaign of 1932, his formation of the Vindicators, an anti-war, anti-alien organization, Reynolds’s chairmanship of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, and his ultimate fall from grace with the voters of North Carolina. Though Reynolds proposed little significant legislation, Pleasants notes that one achievement for North Carolina was his unremitting efforts to gain federal funding for the Blue Ridge Parkway and Smokey Mountains National Park.

Pleasants, who previously coauthored *Frank Porter Graham and the 1950 Senate Race in North Carolina* is an associate professor of history and director of the Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida. This well-researched book, based on his dissertation, draws upon a rich variety of primary sources, such as local North Carolina news articles and personal interviews. It produces a window into not only the life of one of North Carolina’s most controversial politicians but also many cultural and political issues and events of the times. For example, *Buncombe Bob* provides interesting insights into the pre-World War II isolationist movement and the influence of the Nazi propaganda machine on well-intentioned members of Congress with strong isolationist leanings. The book also pursues some curious tangential topics, such as the controversy around Charles Lindbergh’s alleged antisemitism and “un-American” views. On a lighter side, Bob Reynolds’s story is entangled with that of the Hope Diamond, having married (for the fifth time) into the ill-fated family who possessed it.

Buncombe Bob is a story well told. The subject matter is as enjoyable for someone completely unfamiliar with North Carolina politics as it is informative for the North Carolina specialist. Pleasants provides clear notes, photographs, an abundant bibliography and full indexing. The book is a must purchase for public libraries with North Carolina collections and all academic libraries.

– Allan Scherlen
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