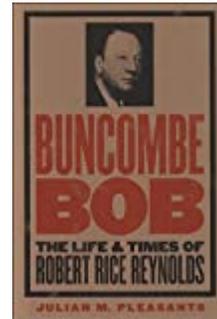




**Julian M. Pleasants.** *Buncombe Bob: The Life and Times of Robert Rice Reynolds.* James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science, Vol 63. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. Index. 95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-5064-0.



**Reviewed by** Peter Murray (Department of History, Methodist College, Fayetteville)

**Published on** H-South (June, 2001)

## **Senator Bob Reynolds: The Tumultuous Career of a Southern Isolationist**

Senator Bob Reynolds: The Tumultuous Career of a Southern Isolationist

Julian Pleasants, associate professor of history and director of the Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida, has produced a meticulously researched account of the career of Bob Reynolds, also known as "Our Bob." The book contributes significantly to twentieth century North Carolina history and to understanding of the South during the New Deal and World War II. This study will interest political scientists and historians concerned with twentieth century U.S. political fringe movements. Pleasants has previously co-authored with the late Augustus M. Burns, *Frank Porter Graham and the 1950 Senate Race in North Carolina*. His mastery of twentieth century North Carolina history is evident throughout the book.

"Buncombe Bob" Reynolds was a maverick politician from western North Carolina who upset the Democratic incumbent senator Cameron Morrison in 1932 and won re-election in 1938 despite being one of the few southern senators who steadfastly supported Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. However, during his second term he

sharply turned to the right and became one of the most outspoken isolationists in the U.S. Senate. Moreover, his favorable comments about Hitler and Nazi Germany and his anti-British statements led many to conclude that he was a fascist himself. He sponsored xenophobic immigration bills and published his own nationalistic publication.

Our Bob was full of contradictions throughout his political career. Although North Carolina was deeply committed to Prohibition, Reynolds won his first election campaigning in support of repeal of the Prohibition Amendment. Despite his extreme isolationism and fascist sympathies, the Senate seniority system made him chair of the Military Affairs Committee during World War II. In addition, he had a turbulent personal life including five wives (a widower three times and divorced twice). Our Bob presented himself as a man of common North Carolina people, but he spent disproportionate amount of his time as Senator traveling the world.

Pleasant's biography excels at establishing the strengths and weaknesses of his subject. Reynolds was an affable and charming person who campaigned effec-

tively. He was always a salesman selling mostly himself. Yet, he was also lazy, drank excessively, and often made statements that amused and delighted his critics and embarrassed his supporters. Pleasants tempers some of the criticism of Reynolds made by contemporaries and he points out that Our Bob avoided some of the excesses common to southern politicians of his time, particularly in race baiting. Overall, the book is well balanced and it shows the many flaws of Reynolds.

Reynolds shocked seasoned North Carolina politicians in 1932 by receiving 65 percent of the vote against the incumbent Senator Cameron Morrison while openly advocating the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. Morrison, however, campaigned very ineptly. Reynolds made Morrison out to be a rich ally of Herbert Hoover while Our Bob was a poor, struggling representative of the people. The size of Reynolds's victory, the audacity of being a wet in a dry state, and his effectiveness on the campaign trail gave Reynolds a special aura within the North Carolina Democratic Party, despite his newcomer status. During his first term, he steadfastly accepted the legislation proposed by Roosevelt and was one of the most liberal southern Democrats.

Pleasants clearly shows that Reynolds was not very influential as a Senator. He found Washington politics difficult to negotiate, especially because of his unrealistic expectations in terms of patronage. Senator Josiah Bailey and former governor O. Max Gardner were much more influential with the Roosevelt administration even though Bailey was far less willing to support New Deal legislation. Moreover, Reynolds found that he did not gain the respect of his fellow Senators, although he did gain publicity on a regular basis by events such as kissing actress Jean Harlow on the steps of the Capitol. He was fortunate that the conservative wing of the North Carolina Democratic Party did not run a strong candidate against him in 1938.

Our Bob is probably most significant as a south-

ern isolationist and outspoken defender of fascism before U.S. entry into World War II. Pleasants carefully traces his nativism and xenophobia throughout his career and examines his unsavory political contacts. Where Reynolds's anti-Semitism originated is not explained, although Pleasants sees his nativism as being similar to the that of the Populist Party. The persistence of his nationalistic and isolationist positions increasingly embarrassed North Carolina voters, and Reynolds decided to retire in 1944 rather than suffer certain defeat at the polls. He briefly re-entered politics in 1950 to challenge Senator Frank P. Graham for the Democratic nomination, but he only played a spoiler role in this campaign. Graham almost won the nomination without a runoff election, but Pleasants argues that Reynolds drew enough votes away from Graham to make the runoff necessary. The liberal Graham then suffered defeat by the conservative Willis Smith aided by the neophyte political operative Jesse Helms.

Pleasants deftly combines government records, secondary sources, private papers, and oral history interviews. By thoroughly combing of North Carolina newspaper as well select national papers, the manuscript convincingly shows how contemporaries saw Reynolds. Although Pleasants originally did his dissertation on the senatorial career of Reynolds in 1971, this is not simply a revised dissertation. The scholarship is impressive and current. The monograph is a substantive contribution to North Carolina history and U.S. political history. Buncombe Bob has been fortunate to have a biographer so well versed in the time period and so fair to this unique North Carolina politician.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

**Citation:** Peter Murray. Review of Pleasants, Julian M., *Buncombe Bob: The Life and Times of Robert Rice Reynolds*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5191>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).