

## The Fourteenth State

### **‘The Reluctant Republic:’ Factual Fiction**

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The most prolific non-scholarly historian who fixated on our little state of Vermont was probably Frederic F. VanDeWater, a New Jersey native, born in 1890, who bought a West Dummerston farm in 1932 and wrote up a storm about the past of his adopted state.

Talk about prolific: VanDeWater wrote a total of twenty-eight books, including a long yarn about the history of Lakes George and Champlain, a lengthy tome of historical fiction called “The Reluctant Rebel,” a couple of memoirs about living in the country and much else, not all dealing with Vermont. Before moving to “the country,” he had graduated from the Columbia School of Journalism and had written for at newspapers including the New York American, Evening Post, and Tribune.

His most ambitious work was “The Reluctant Republic,” a 340-page personal regurgitation of Vermont’s history from the building of Fort Dummer in 1724 to statehood in 1791.

VanDeWater’s prose is often colorful and marked by speculative dialogue that Ethan Allen and others “must have said.” Sometimes these dialogues are cringeworthy, especially when the author adds an ethnic dialect to his own imagination. Here’s what a Vermont farmer “said” when Burgoyne’s troops were coming south along the Champlain Valley: “Goddam Dutchmen. An almighty lot of ‘em. Come to take our land, hev they? Wal, by Jeess, we’ll teach ‘em better. Git your firelock, Obed, an’ come along. Ain’t goin’ to let ‘em hev your farm, be ye?”

Whew!

Here is a sample of text from the amusing chapter “His Excellency the Realtor:”

*Wentworth leaned back in his chair, swelling his jowls above his lace stock. His clever eyes were narrow, his heart beating faster. Opportunities for a man of parts with a fine business mind were not too plentiful in this new world. Opportunities for the governor of a small frontier colony were scander still. One must not ignore possibilities; one must take eagerly whatever chance offered. If a governor was to make his province stronger, and himself wealthier, he could not afford to split hairs or weigh eyelashes – not if he intended to go into the wholesale real-estate business.*

“The Reluctant Republic” is unsourced and undocumented, with a modest bibliography and no index – not something to appeal to the scholar or someone writing a term paper. The writing is uneven. VanDeWater’s chapter called “Portrait of Two Brothers” is a masterpiece of perceptive narrative that sizes up Ethan and Ira as well as anyone has. Yet his lengthy chapter about the so-called “Westminster massacre” in Cumberland County in 1775 seems garrulous and confusing.

In spite of these flaws, I suggest that it could be worth one’s time to peruse it, even to read it. My copy is a 1974 reprint by The Countryman Press of Woodstock, which includes a critical “appraisal and appreciation” by H. Nicholas Muller III, a veteran Vermontianist, to coin a term. Muller was critical of such subjects as VanDeWater’s interpretation of the Haldimand negotiations and his underestimation of the influence of land speculators during the Dorset conventions. Yet the author earned his high marks for “one of the most readable accounts of Vermont’s early years.”