

## Vance, Rupert Bayless <sup>[1]</sup>



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## Vance, Rupert Bayless

by J. Isaac Copeland, 1996

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Rupert Bayless Vance, university professor and sociologist, was born in Plumerville, a community in central Arkansas located only a short distance from Conway. He was the oldest of four children of Walter Johnson and Lula Mary Bayless Vance. His father owned a general store in the village and a beef and dairy farm where the family lived.

At age three Vance was stricken with poliomyelitis, which left both legs paralyzed and forced him to use crutches. His mother, who had been a schoolteacher, helped him adjust to his handicap and supervised his early education. After entering public school in the fourth grade at age ten, he was always at the head of his class. A love of reading acquired while very young became his main diversion. The family bought the works of Scott, Dickens, Eliot, and Irving by the set in an effort to satiate his literary appetite. As an adult he was an avid reader of fiction, poetry, treatises on art, philosophy, science, and history.

On completing high school Vance entered Henderson-Brown College (now [Hendrix](#) <sup>[2]</sup>); he was graduated as valedictorian in 1920 with an A.B. degree and majors in English and the social sciences. He then won a fellowship for a year's study at [Vanderbilt University](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, which awarded him a master's degree in economics. At Vanderbilt he became acquainted with the colorful and well-known Conservative, Professor Gus Dyer—an experience, Vance reportedly said, humorously, that almost turned him to radicalism.

Accepting a teaching position in Talihina, Okla., Vance taught English in the high school and served as principal for two years. From 1923 to 1926 he also taught English in [South Georgia College](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, a junior college located in McRae, but during this time he decided to study sociology. Vance was familiar with the work being done at [The University of North Carolina](#) <sup>[5]</sup> under the leadership of Professor Howard W. Odum, especially at the Institute for Research in Social Science, which Odum had established. In 1926 Vance entered The University of North Carolina and the next year was granted a teaching fellowship. In 1928 he was awarded the doctorate and received appointments to the staff of Odum's institute and to the faculty of the Department of Sociology. Though subsequently offered attractive appointments elsewhere, Vance remained with the university. His doctoral dissertation, published in 1929 under the title *Human Factors in Cotton Culture* <sup>[6]</sup>, was the first of three major classics that he wrote. For *Human Geography of the South* <sup>[7]</sup>, which was recognized as a masterpiece in American social science on its publication in 1932, the [North Carolina Literary and Historical Association](#) <sup>[8]</sup> awarded Vance the [Mayflower Cup](#) <sup>[9]</sup> in 1933. *All These People: The Nation's Human Resources in the South* <sup>[10]</sup>, appearing in 1945, was promptly acclaimed by population experts as a model of its kind. This book was destined to be read not only by scholars, but by governors, legislators, and editors as well. It won for Vance the Lord and Taylor Design for Living Award.

Professor George Tindall, in a memorial presented to the university's Faculty Council (17 Oct. 1975), noted that in addition to his major writings Vance had been a collaborator in the writing and editing of four other books, the author of a dozen monographs and nearly one hundred articles, and the compiler of an annotated bibliography of travel accounts. The bibliography of "The Twentieth-Century South as Viewed by English-speaking Travelers, 1900–1955," with its excellent introductory essay, was published as one section of Thomas D. Clark's two-volume *Travels in the New South* <sup>[11]</sup>. Vance's contribution is a bibliographical tour de force. Tindall also noted the diversity of Vance's scholarship. The *Raleigh News and Observer* called attention to Vance's ability to appeal to different age levels, citing his *Exploring the South* <sup>[12]</sup>, written with Marjorie Bond and John Ivey, as a text for eighth-grade students.

For a number of years Vance was a member of the board of governors of [The University of North Carolina Press](#) <sup>[13]</sup>. He served on the administrative board of the Graduate School and was appointed to a number of other university committees. Of particular delight to him was his editorial association with *Social Forces* <sup>[14]</sup>.

On the national scene he served at various times as a consultant to the National Resources Planning Board, Rosenwald Fund, Social Science Research Council, National Institutes of Health, Bureau of the Census, and United Nations. "His studies directly influenced the farm tenancy programs of the New Deal and the *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* <sup>[15]</sup>, prepared in 1934 by the National Emergency Council at the request of President Roosevelt." Professionally, Vance was president of the [Southern Sociological Society](#) <sup>[16]</sup> (1938), [American Sociological Society](#) <sup>[17]</sup> (1944), and [Population Association of America](#) <sup>[18]</sup> (1952).

Vance "won national and international distinction as a scholar who broke new ground in many fields." Though he identified himself strongly with the South and was in a sense a "professional Southerner," he was neither a parochial sentimentalist

nor an agrarian romantic. Instead, he was a "realist who believed the South's destiny was, and should be, to enter the mainstream of an urbanized national society." His hope was that the South could retain some of its rural and small-town quality of life while avoiding the worst of the big-city problems.

He held summer teaching appointments at several universities, was a visiting professor at [Louisiana State University](#)<sup>[19]</sup> for a year, and accepted a number of invitations from universities to deliver lectures. At The University of North Carolina he was named a Kenan professor in 1945, and he received honorary doctorates from the university, Hendrix College, and the [University of Arkansas](#)<sup>[20]</sup>. In 1963 The University of North Carolina bestowed on him the Thomas Jefferson Award for exemplifying in his life and work "the best tradition and spirit of Thomas Jefferson."

As a teacher Vance was held in high regard by his students. He was master of the subject matter and a lecturer whose comments often sparkled with touches of humor. As a colleague he was understanding and cheerfully gave of himself to all who sought his counsel. He directed numerous doctoral dissertations and retained a keen interest in the careers of his former students.

In 1930 Vance married Rheba Cecile Usher, a native of Bennettsville, S.C., and in so doing took one of the most fortunate steps of his life. The two had met as fellow students, both having arrived at Chapel Hill in the same year, and for forty-five years they remained a devoted and remarkable couple. The Vances had three sons: David Rupert, Donald Ernest, and Victor Stuart. In the last years of his life Vance's physical condition deteriorated noticeably, confining him to a wheelchair. On 21 August he suffered a slight stroke; respiratory complications developed, and he died four days later, survived by his wife and sons.

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