

1-1-2015

Book Review - The Magnificent Mays: A Biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays

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Recommended Citation

Eberhard, Wallace B. (2015) "Book Review - The Magnificent Mays: A Biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays," *Georgia Library Quarterly*: Vol. 52: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol52/iss1/15>

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Off the SHELF

The Magnificent Mays: A Biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays by John Herbert Roper, Sr. (University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC, 2012: ISBN 9781611170771, \$44.95)

Benjamin Elijah Mays' earliest memory came from a moment on a dusty South Carolina road. The year was 1898, and the town of Phoenix, South Carolina, was recovering from a bloody, deadly race riot that exploded when a number of black men tried to vote or sign affidavits that they were prevented from voting. He and his father were halted by a band of white men brandishing rifles. The thugs made his father salute and bow to them before galloping away. Mays was four.

It's hard not to marvel at Mays' record given that so few people of color were able to find and climb a ladder of success in early twentieth century America: a bachelor's degree from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, an MA and a PhD from the University of Chicago, faculty appointments at Morehouse College and South Carolina State, National Urban League executive in Tampa, and president of Morehouse College.

The art of biography is much more than a retelling of the subject's achievements, triumphs, and failures. The author—John Herbert Roper, Sr., Richardson Professor of American history at Emory and Henry College—is no stranger to the task of telling a life. He has authored five volumes of southern history,

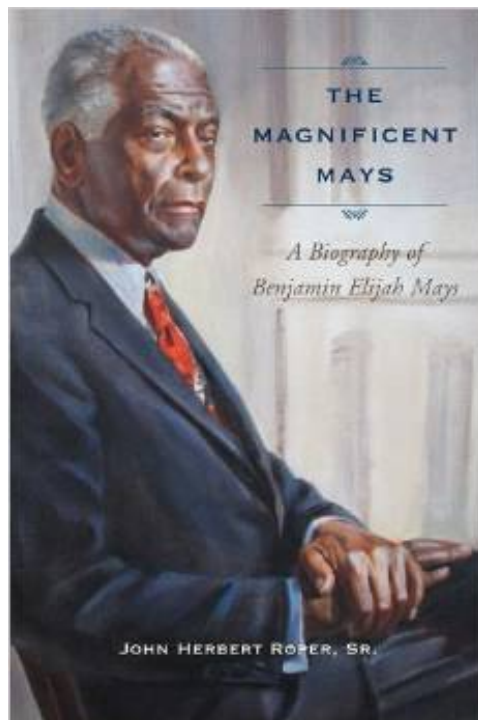
including biographies of historians, including C. Vann Woodward and U. B. Phillips, whose works were legendary and seminal.

Roper's approach to developing an understanding of Mays is best described as interior. He explores Mays intellectual growth as human and leader with a confident story telling of that growth that does not hedge. He

tells with confidence how Mays came to be a champion of civil rights and leader in the black community and later one of the key figures in bringing about a peaceful desegregation of the Atlanta school system. He does not hesitate to describe an historical moment with a gripping narrative or set forth what he perceives to be critical decision points in Mays' evolution as theologian, voice for the African-Americans who had no voice, dogged and principled administrator, and mentor to many of the modern generation of civil rights leaders, most notably Martin Luther King Jr. The

intensity of Mays' meeting with and questioning of the great Gandhi on a trip to India are particularly engrossing.

It is Roper's steady development of character and intellectual breadth that is most engaging and instructive. Mays sought excellence in colleges and universities outside the South. At Bates and Chicago, he sought out the teachers and thinkers who helped him build on his basic biblical faith. These carried him to an understanding of social justice, the politics of



injustice, and the need to patiently work toward a society in which opportunity is open to people of all colors and faiths.

This is not a children's version of Mays' life. It takes a patient reading to understand how one man, determined to learn and serve, became

the important figure that he was in the continuing struggle for human rights.

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