

## review essays

### the literature of baseball

THE BASEBALL ENCYCLOPEDIA (Bicentennial Edition). New York: Macmillan, 1976. \$25.00. GUIDE TO BASEBALL LITERATURE. By Anton Grobani. Detroit: Gale Research Corporation. 1975. \$15.00. THE SCRAPBOOK HISTORY OF BASEBALL. Edited by Jordan A. Deutsch, Richard M. Cohen, Roland T. Johnson, and David S. Neft. Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill. 1975. \$12.95. BASEBALL WHEN THE GRASS WAS REAL. By Donald Honig. New York: Coward McCann & Geoghegan. 1975. \$12.50. BASEBALL BETWEEN THE LINES. By Donald Honig. New York: Coward McCann & Geoghegan. 1976. \$12.50. BUSH LEAGUE: A HISTORY OF MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL. By Robert Obojski. New York: Macmillan. 1975. \$12.95. DYNASTY: THE NEW YORK YANKEES, 1949-1964. By Peter Golenbock. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall. 1975. \$9.95. THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE NATIONAL GAME. By Leverett T. Smith, Jr. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press. 1975. \$12.50. AMERICA THROUGH BASEBALL. By David Q. Voigt. Chicago: Nelson-Hall. 1976. \$9.95.

Although baseball would seem to be an ideal subject of inquiry for American Studies, requiring as it does an approach through a combination of traditional disciplines, and although baseball has stimulated a greater volume and variety of literature than any subject of comparable significance in American cultural history, baseball literature remains preponderantly juvenile, statistical, and anecdotal. Among many recent publications, however, are several that indicate a refinement of traditional and popular forms of baseball literature, and several that show how materials and methods now established may enable us to take a more comprehensive and analytical view of the national game than has heretofore been taken.

The voluminous statistics of individual player performance are admirably gathered and arranged in the third or "Bicentennial" edition of the Macmillan *Baseball Encyclopedia*, by far the most comprehensive baseball reference work ever compiled. In addition to updating individual and team records through the 1975 season, this edition restores many of the features included in the first (1969) edition and omitted from the controversial 1974 edition. The work contains single-season and career records for every individual who appeared in major league baseball from 1876 through 1975, league summaries for each season, with each

team's usual lineup. Brief synopses of each All-Star, playoff, and World Series game are provided, as are lists of all-time and single-season batting, pitching, and fielding leaders, winners of the Triple Crown, Rookie of the Year, and Most Valuable Player awards, and members of the Hall of Fame. A useful new feature is an alphabetical index of all players who have appeared in one or more games for each major league franchise.<sup>1</sup>

Anton Grobani's *Guide to Baseball Literature* is worth studying as the first attempt to list and classify baseball publications, though it is somewhat deficient as a bibliographical reference work. The Guide divides baseball literature into 33 different categories, comprising some 2,750 entries. The categories themselves are loose and overlapping, and particular works are occasionally misplaced. While it may be economical to employ a single entry for an entire run of a periodical such as *The Sporting News* or *Baseball Magazine*, one would have preferred more detailed entries for such important annuals as the *Spalding*, *Reach*, and *Beadle's* guides. As might be expected in a project of this magnitude, there are a number of omissions, and Grobani's policy on the inclusion of reprints and ephemera seems inconsistent. The lack of introductory or explanatory apparatus leaves one to speculate on the procedures followed in compiling the entries, and on the standards applied in determining inclusion or exclusion. A quantitative analysis of the entries confirms that the vast bulk of baseball literature is aimed at the juvenile and immediate commercial markets, with the largest numbers of entries in the categories of fiction, instructional works, and biography. Students of children's literature interested in remedying the neglect of sports mythology would do well to consult the Grobani volume, as would anyone studying a particular player or team. Periodical articles and chapters of books are not included in the compilation.

*The Scrapbook History of Baseball* is patently a commercial project, of limited value to the scholar. The book consists entirely of photographic reprints of newspaper articles on baseball from 1876-1975. These clippings are culled from an odd variety of newspapers, and the quality of the reproduction is, in many cases, atrocious. Newspaper records are invaluable sources of interest for students of baseball, but the *Scrapbook* presents a topical and arbitrary selection of superficial interest.

Donald Honig's two collections of edited interviews with former major league ballplayers follow the method of Lawrence S. Ritter's excellent compilation, *The Glory of Their Times*. In this form of oral history the interviewer records a conversation with the player, omitting his own questions and comments from the transcription. The result is a kind of continuous narrative with colloquial life, but the reader is left uncertain as to which portions of the conversation have been altered or deleted. The merit of this method is that it allows for a sustained anecdotal style; the limit is that it allows the ballplayer, or the editor, to avoid the genuinely controversial or distasteful material. One would like, for

---

<sup>1</sup> In their apparent haste to get this edition into print, the compilers have allowed a distracting number of errors and inconsistencies to appear in the new material. Even a cursory proofreading should have eliminated these, and it is disappointing to see that this edition retains a number of its predecessors' errors in the records of individual players (Waddell, 1904, Hayes, Suhr, and Brubaker, 1937, and Rackley, 1949, to name a few). In spite of these occasional blemishes, *The Baseball Encyclopedia* is the one indispensable volume in a baseball reference library. With this work, one may study the relative merits of individual players or eras, baseball truisms such as the "sophomor jinx" or the wildness of lefthanded pitchers, and a host of other matters of individual player performance.

example, to have Enos Slaughter's comments on the St. Louis Cardinals' attempted race strike against Jackie Robinson in 1947. But the emphasis in these accounts is on baseball itself, rather than on the social, economic, and historical backgrounds that enrich the Ritter book, and the more recent players appear, by and large, less bitter about baseball management and less contemptuous of the contemporary players than were the men interviewed by Ritter. The historical frames of Honig's books are somewhat aslant: *When the Grass Was Real* nominally deals with baseball "from the 20's to the 40's," yet it contains relatively few allusions to the 20's, and it reaches into the 50's on several occasions. *Between the Lines*, similarly, is ostensibly about the 40's and 50's but includes an interview with Billy Werber more appropriate to the earlier volume. For baseball buffs there are some excellent anecdotes, including a classic description of Ted Williams' batting eye: "High and tight is ball one. Low and away is ball two."

Minor league baseball has never received anything like the attention accorded major league teams and players, and Robert Obojski's "history" of minor league baseball is primarily of interest to baseball fans who wish to observe the trajectory of the careers of major league players. The book contains a variety of statistical records of seven minor leagues, from the highest classification to the lowest, skimpy sections on outstanding individual performances, brief treatments of some important minor league administrators, and two descriptive historical essays. Insofar as Obojski has a thesis, it is that "blanket television of major league games across the country" was responsible for the decline of minor league baseball. This is a common explanation, of course, but hardly a telling one. Minor league baseball was hurt by television, not just because it showed major league baseball for free, but also because television forced minor league baseball into direct competition with Milton Berle and the Colgate Comedy Hour. Television changed the whole pattern of American family recreation, and the mass production of home air-conditioning contributed to the technological devastation of minor league baseball. Obojski's book is most useful in documenting the institutional uncertainty of this peculiar American small business.

The team history, a venerable form of sports literature, receives a somewhat sophisticated refinement in Peter Golenbock's account of the New York Yankees from 1949-1964. Each season's account is prefaced by a decorative paragraph of current events, and the Yankee players, many of whom were interviewed a la Roger Kahn, are allowed to swear and drink. Golenbock attributes most of the success of the Yankees during this period to the shrewd manipulations of George Weiss and Casey Stengel, and he argues persuasively that the Yankee organization declined because of the forced retirement of these two. Thus, unlike traditional sports team histories, there is little of the assumed manifest destiny in the volume. The style of the book is wearing. Each chapter follows the same format, and the author seems enamored of the word "excellently."

Leverett T. Smith announces a promising thesis at the outset of *The American Dream and the National Game*, but he fails to clarify and support this thesis in the remainder of his study. Briefly, Smith proposes to trace the transition between 19th- and 20th-century attitudes towards sports and games. The earlier views, he contends, were that sports were at once irrelevant or immoral and "a manifestation of the dominant spirit of the nation," while current beliefs are that sports and games are "a kind of repository for values lost in the confusion of the modern

world" and "a useful metaphor for interpreting human behavior." The inherent paradox in the two 19th-century attitudes, however, remains unaccounted for, and though Smith examines the Black Sox scandal and the emergence of Babe Ruth and Judge Landis as catalytic events, he does not adequately define the values and metaphors of current sport to sustain his thesis. He says, for example, that the national game may now be football, rather than baseball because "like professional baseball, it has become associated with the anti-democratic, anti-individualistic, heart-and-will oriented ideals toward which we are trained in order to give our urban, industrial activities meaning." If both sports inculcate the same values, one must wonder why one sport supersedes the other. Similarly, if both sports serve as a repository of values not found in American society as a whole, an explanation is required as to why football, rather than baseball currently supplies a particular emotional need. In fact, as writers like Roger Angell and Kevin Kerrane have argued, the aesthetic of baseball is complexly different from the aesthetic of football, and in a pluralistic society, neither may be accurately described as "national." Some of baseball's recent difficulties may be attributed to the fact that the public has come to understand baseball as an urban industrial enterprise, and to sense the loss of the illusion that the game is an idyllic pastoral sport.

Smith gathers together an ill-fitting variety of sources to extend his discussion. He is at his best in cataloguing the metaphors applied by journalists to the Black Sox scandal, and in his concise explication of the important Mark Harris baseball novel, *The Southpaw*, but he fails to make a case for the relevance of a long disquisition on *Moby Dick*, and he alludes inconclusively to writers as various as Huizinga, Frost, Hemingway, Carlyle, and Jerry Kramer. The study wants a more precise definition of terms, and a more consistent method of analysis.

David Q. Voigt, already one of the most distinguished scholars of the game, adds to our understanding of the role of baseball in American society in a unified collection of essays, each of which describes the manner in which a particular aspect of baseball has developed in parallel with national institutions and values. His remarks on baseball and the union ethic, for example, are acute, and throughout the study he combines a detailed knowledge of baseball history with responsible sociological discipline. Relying heavily on *obiter dicta* of Marshall McLuhan, Voigt argues that American heroes are now creatures of the technological moment, rather than sustained "linear" historical personages. Though it is debatable whether the changing conception of the American hero is the result of technology or of some more fundamental change in American values, studies like Voigt's provide substance for the continuing debate.

"Certainly," Voigt warns, "the acceptance of sports studies as a scholarly discipline hinges on the ability of its students to shed light on our understanding of social change, lest such efforts emerge as a merely descriptive form of popular culture." This caveat might well be borne in mind by future students of baseball and its literature, with the stipulation that "social change" includes changes in the supreme values of a culture. Though no analysis of American baseball has yet joined the statistical, economic, and historical realities of the game with its literary and mythological import, studies like Voigt's and Smith's are useful beginnings.

University of Kansas

James B. Carothers