

Wagenheim, K., *CLEMENTE* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973).  
Illustrated., 274 pp.

It is highly superfluous here to caution historians of sport to beware of the juvenile quality of most sporting biographies that since World War II have swamped bookstalls like a paper tidal wave. Typically ghosted by moonlighting sportswriters, who toss them off in hackneyed "gee whiz" style, such books try hard to perpetuate the romantic image of commercialized sport. Invariably the athlete-hero is depicted as a hard-working dedicate who successfully pursues the American dream of cash and glory. To be charitable, and at the same time to stick to my watery metaphor, let it be said that mercifully, such works quickly ripple away, forgotten like a furrow in a plowed sea.

Hopefully for the present generation of serious sports students, a recent trickle of more realistic and more critical biographies and autobiographies gives promise of vitalizing this moribund literary sargossa sea with a gulf stream of challenging ideas. Stirred by Jim Brosnan's autobiographical sketches, *The Long Season* and *Pennant Race*, and further agitated by Roger Kahn, Jim Bouton, the late Len Schecter, Curt Flood and others, the lives of major league baseball mercenaries are given realistic treatment. Like the famed Franklin portrait, the warts and blemishes are retained and the lives treated candidly, realistically and with attention paid to the shaping influences of society and culture.

Kal Wagenheim's *Clemente* is a welcome piece of flotsam in this new literary stream. It is a work that will be welcomed, admired and turned into a model by historians of sport. Not that it is the last word in a new style; far from it, but it is a step in the direction of critical thought. Written by an *ex-New York Times* writer, who, after marrying a Puerto-Rican moved to that much-exploited isle and embraced its culture with a passion tempered by his own discipline and understanding of comparative history and the workings of social and cultural processes. As an outsider coming into the Puerto Rican culture, his knowledge of two cultures—the *gringo* mainland culture and that of the island-bound together in uneasy and always patronizing union, enable him to put his finger on the motivation of "What made Roberto run."

It is fortunate that the life and times of the late Roberto Clemente found a chronicler like Wagenheim. How easy it would have been to treat

the great Pittsburgh outfielder as another ethnic-stereotype; a hero who happened to die tragically in a cargo plane crash during the Christmas season of 1972 whilst on a mercy mission aimed at bringing succor to victims of the great Honduran earthquake. Coming at the peak of Clemente's baseball career, after the outfielder had become only the eleventh major leaguer ever to smite 3000 hits, so mighty a death has the quality of poetic tragedy going with it. It is the stuff Pindar would have welcomed. Certainly there is something Olympian in the story of the great athlete, dying young at the very peak of his athletic prowess.

One can imagine a lesser biographer warming to the task, embellishing his account by dwelling on how Clemente surmounted rural poverty in depressed Puerto Rico to become a brilliant ballplayer. He could tickle reader prejudices by anecdotes of how Clemente struggled against cultural shock playing in Pittsburgh and finally succeeding in becoming a star in the proper American mold. To complete a neat, hackneyed package such a scribbler might toss in the details of his lifetime batting average of .317, his playing in 12 All-Star games, his fielding that won him the annual Golden Glove Award twelve times, and his brilliant play in two World Series. To cap it all off, there is his tragic death and his posthumous election to the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown on August 6, 1973 complete with weeping widow and stalwart sons. So might run the typical baseball biography format. And to his credit, Wagenheim breaks out of this mold brilliantly.

For example, Wagenheim's deft touch for comparative cultural history has him ranging Clemente's boyhood against the background of Puerto Rican history. That troubled island's long standing depression, its rural poverty both shaped the world view of Clemente along with the unique variety of racism found in Puerto Rico. Compared to the racism that Clemente battled in the United States, the Puerto Rican variety is far more benign. It had Clemente proudly wearing the nickname "el negrito." something that would have been a slur in the United States.

Clemente's socialization into Puerto Rican culture and society is deftly treated. There is the heavy impact of his parents whom Clemente always respected and whose blessing he continually sought at all points in his life. Other significant influences on Clemente's personality development are introduced, including Roberto Marin his island coach; Pedro Zorillo the island scout who scouted him and who fortified his pride in being black and Latin; Pittsburgh Phil, a constant and sympathetic American friend; and others. In developing these influences Wagenheim affects a style of anthropological interviewing developed by the late Oscar Lewis. All are allowed to tell their stories in their own words, but what is missing are the probing follow up questions that might have taken the reader beyond some of the inevitable cliches and outbursts of hero-worship.

The changing force of ethnic prejudice and discrimination in the United States is well developed by Wagenheim. Caught up in this whirlwind, Clemente suffered both as a black and as a Puerto Rican. That he fought back with pride and determination, never stinting in his battle to win respect, praise and a salary equivalent to white stars, put the great

outfielder in constant conflict with sportwriters who never understood him and who sometimes tried to brand him as a hypochondriac and slacker. The price Clemente paid was that his greatest feats that came during the off seasons when he played Caribbean ball were never covered. But to a generation of racially proud Puerto Ricans and blacks in the United States Clemente was an authentic hero. Sensing this, Clemente made their cause his own. To the end of his life he saw himself as the representative of all Latin-American major leaguers. And he never stopped fighting for the cause of equality of blacks and Latins. One of a few players to back Curt Flood in his suit against major league baseball's reserve clause, this was but one blow that Clemente struck in behalf of all professional athletes.

Another price paid for such politicking was fewer opportunities for profitable endorsements and grudging recognition in the media. For daring to sound off about such shortcomings, the American sporting press often branded him as an agitator or trouble-maker-traditional expletives applied to one who rocks the boat in American society.

Wagenheim's fine book is not the last word in taking the measure of so complex an athlete-hero. A great deal of follow up work is wanted to properly assess the role of this complicated hero and spokesman for so many Latin American players. The presence of so many Latin American and black players in the ranks of American baseball, and the subtle movement of baseball's center of gravity from North to Latin America, demands no less.

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