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Review Essays

The Babe in '74

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Creamer, Robert W. *Babe: The Legend Comes to Life.*
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974.

Graham, John Alexander. *Babe Ruth Caught in a Snowstorm.*
Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1973.

Neugeboren, Jay. *Sam's Legacy.*
New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974.

Smelser, Marshall. *The Life That Ruth Built.*
New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1975.

Smith, Robert. *Babe Ruth's America.*
New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1974.

Sobol, Ken. *Babe Ruth & The American Dream.*
New York: Ballantine Books, 1974.

Wagenheim, Kal. *Babe Ruth: His Life and Legend.*
New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974.

In *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) William Faulkner has Jason Compson, one of his most unpleasant characters, discuss the American League pennant race with the proprieter of a cigar store:

> "Well," Mac says, ''I reckon you've got money on the Yankees this year."
>
> "What for?" I says.

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"The Pennant," he says. "Not anything in the league can beat them."

"Like hell there's not," I says. ''They're shot," I says. "you think a team can be that lucky forever?"

"I don't call it luck," Mac says.

I wouldn't bet on any team that fellow Ruth played on," I says. "Even if I knew it was going to win."

"Yes?" Mac says.

"I can name you a dozen men in either League who're more valuable than he is," I says.

"What have you got against Ruth?" Mac says.

"Nothing," I says. "I haven't got any thing against him. I don't even like to look at his picture."

We are not used to hearing such animosity directed against Babe Ruth, whose public image seems always to have been that of the savior-hero. It may be that this is one way Faulkner had of indicating to his readers what sort of man Jason Compson was, for he said of him, after *The Sound and the Fury* was published, that Jason "to me represented complete evil. He's the most vicious character in my opinion I ever thought of." Jason's attitude toward Ruth is an early manifestation of the Japanese war cry, "to Hell with Babe Ruth."

A man with such a large and positive public image deserves biographical study, and in 1974 Babe Ruth received considerable attention of this sort, when four appeared. Another—Marshall Smelser's, the most exhaustive—appeared in 1975. In addition, Babe Ruth plays an important part in two novels: John Alexander Graham's *Babe Ruth Caught in a Snowstorm* (1973), in which his role is symbolic, and Jay Neugeboren's *Sam's Legacy* (1974), in which he appears as a character.

Seven books in a period of, at most, three years; this is a great deal of attention to give a professional baseball player. So much that it may be that, by considering the books together, we may learn something about ourselves and the 1970s as well as about Babe Ruth. This review will attempt to understand the shapes our attention takes.

One event, Henry Aaron's pursuit of Ruth's record of 714 lifetime home runs, only *seems* important in accounting for the appearance of all these books. Aaron's passing of the Magic Number in April of 1974 certainly might have excited the editors and publishers of these books about sales enough so that they insisted the books be completed and published in time to take advantage of the free publicity. But it is unlikely that any of them was undertaken primarily to take advantage of that publicity. They are all serious books.

Reading them one after another has left this reviewer with the conviction that there are three things which fascinate us about the life of Babe Ruth. First, we are fascinated by his animality, particularly his sexuality. He is the man of appetite. Secondly, we seem ready to agree that his professional achievement in baseball was itself meaningful and worth study (a cultural fact which also accounts for the existence of this journal). Finally, we are interested in Ruth because it is possible, through him, to study the mechanics and the mystery of becoming and staying a celebrity. Rather than taking the books one at a time, I'll look at each under each of these three headings, hoping to provide the reader at once a sense of the worth of each book and of the meaning of Babe Ruth to us as the seventies end.

At the end of *Babe Ruth: His Life and Legend,* Kal Wagenheim simply throws up his hands in despair at explaining the meaning of Ruth's life. He writes that "a few thoughtful writers . . . have tried to encapsulate the Babe within some rational formula.''

> But even they ignore the immensely random quality of life, that vast roulette wheel of genes and chance, which—had some other road been taken—might have cast him in the role of saloon-keeper, tailor, longshoreman, or felon. It defies all understanding. Here was a man with a special gift who broke all the rules with a flourish, triumphed grandly, and suffered a painful, early demise. But within his sadly truncated time span, he soared higher and drank deeper of life–dregs and all—than a hundred ordinary men combined. (p.271)

Our biographers substantially agree on the rational formula couched in these words: that Ruth was essentially the man of appetite; he lived elementally—in touch with the forces of the universe in a much more profound way than those of us who use our minds. Wagenheim quotes Joe Dugan on Ruth: "He was more than an animal. He was a god." Ruth seems to have passed by the *human* condition, and this may be the best way to deal with the personal dimension of his life.

But our biographers try hard to present him as a human being. Marshall Smelser makes the most extensive effort to trace his development—to show him developing a systematic notion of the nature of the universe around him, whether conscious of it or not. Early in *The Life That Ruth Built* (note the significance of the book's title in this respect) Smelser mentions that "it was a real question whether he [Ruth] could ever be anything but a moral dependent." (p. 18). In the course of his narrative, Smelser characterizes Ruth "a Christian hedonist" (p. 144), and throughout the book presents him as a man with a kind of split personality, on some occasions behaving well (''Xavierian Brother George"), on others boorishly ("the dockside slob"). Smelser shows Ruth growing into maturity, and always treats the growth of the actual man as important. He summarizes.

> Babe Ruth never had a regular boyhood. He used his years with the Red Sox, and with the Yan-

> kees until 1925, to be a boy. The phase from 1925 until he married Claire we might call young manhood. After marrying Claire he became mature with her help. (p.405)

Other biographers spend much less time on this aspect of Ruth's life, and perhaps justly so. Smelser himself remarks that except for the "simplehearted Christianity the boy Ruth picked up from the example of the Xaverian Brothers, he had no view of the world" (p.80). Robert Smith, in *Babe Ruth's America,* speaks of Ruth as a man without a memory, and urban male comparable to Dreiser's *Sister Carrie.*

> He was always intent on the immediate moment; the memory of things past trickled out of his mind like signs he had seen through a train window. He almost never talked with his teammates or with anyone about his early days, and some men who knew him well were convinced he had had no childhood or any parents at all but had simply leaped out of a cloud somewhere, baseball spikes on and bat in hand, looking for a pitch to swing at. (p.94)

Ken Sobol suggests even darker possibilities for this line of thought in his *Babe Ruth and The American Dream.*

> Unlike Jack Dempsey and Johnny Weissmuller, his two main rivals in the sports world, both of whom became big hits on the screen, the camera seemed to reveal a fundamental deadness in Ruth. He projected no sense of who he was, no feeling of dynamism, no trace of the confident power that eminated from him when he was surrounded by large crowds. But that wasn't really surprising. Ruth always had difficulty when he was on his own, without mobs of admirers to respond to. (p.21)

Robert Creamer quotes with approval Frank Graham's remark that Ruth was "a very simple man," and notes that he was widely thought to be subnormal mentally *(Babe: The Legend Comes to Life,* pp. 319, 330). Creamer also focuses on what appears to be the essence of Ruth the person when he says:

> Everything about him reflected sexuality—the restless, roving energy; the aggressive skills; fastball pitching; home run hitting; the speed with which he drove cars; the loud, rich voice; the insatiable appetite; the constant need to placate his mouth with food, drink, a cigar, chewing gum, anything. When he played poker, he liked to raise even when his cards did not justify a raise, and when he lucked into a pot he chortled happily. He was a fairly skillful bridge player, but he wanted to play every hand himself and often outbid his partner as well as their opponents. In retirement his favorite sports were golf and bowling; he liked to hit a golf ball a long way, and in bowling to keep track of the total number of pins he knocked down rather than his average score. He loved to win in whatever he did. He received absolute physical joy from cards, baseball, golf, bowling, punching the bag, sex. (p. 322)

To their credit, none of his biographers sensationalizes the sexual aspect of his life. Smelser has the most difficulty with it; *The Life That Ruth Built* is a rather staid book (some readers will like it for this). He indicates in his preface that "I don't deny Ruth's gluttony, but I tried to get it straight and explain it" (p.xi). And he dismisses many of the stories of Ruth's sexual exploits as unverifiable (see p. 142). Sobol's presentation of some comments by other players' wives who were revolted by Ruth (see pp.64-65) only underlines Ruth's extraordinary need for sexual relations, his elemental wish to be one with the world.

Ruth's biographers account for this need by citing early privations. Smith reports him in his first years with the Yankees greeting "each new day with the fresh face and eager eyes of a boy turned loose from school" (p. 111). Creamer concludes his chapters on Ruth's life in reform school with these words: "He was free. After all those years he was finally out of the cage, and nobody was ever going to get him into one again" (p. 52). Smelser agrees (see p. 405, quoted above).

Perhaps the most bizarre confirmation that Ruth was primarily the man of appetite, that in him the elemental, sexual being was the person, comes in a novel published in 1974, Jay Neugeboren's *Sam's Legacy*. This novel, at once realistic and symbolic in texture, concerns the search of Sam Berman, a small-time gambler who lives in Brooklyn, for an ethical order by which to live. Sam's life is shown to us in counterpoint with that of an elderly black janitor who lives in the basement of the same building and goes by the name of Mason Tidewater. Tidewater, it turns out, was a great black baseball player in the 1920s—a pitcher who turned into a slugger. Tidewater has written an account of his adventures in the black baseball leagues, fully reproduced in the text of *Sam's Legacy* (pp.69-91, 177-194, 297-336), titled "My Life and Death in the Negro American Baseball League: A Slave Narrative." Babe Ruth is a character in this narrative of Tidewater's rise to prominence in Negro baseball which ends abruptly when he murders a teammate. Ruth meets and competes against Tidewater during the post-season barnstorming tours of the twenties and becomes his lover.

Reviewers of *Sam's Legacy* have objected to this because it seemed to them preposterous and too obviously symbolic. For them, it was too obvious a way to convey white domination of black culture in the United States. But a reader of the biographies of Ruth will find the character in Neugeboren's novel rather true to the biographers' notion of who Ruth was and the bisexuality a logical extension of the portrait they paint. Neugeboren's portrait of Ruth the roisterer rings true, although purists will object because in one barroom scene set in 1924 Tony Lazzeri appears, more than a year before he began his career with the Yankees.

Manson Tidewater's fight to overcome Ruth's domination is professional and cultural as well as sexual, and in the end it appears true that, as Smelser says "[Ruth] liked baseball better than beer, night life, and overeating" (p. 474). Perhaps he is memorable because so much of his sexual energy went into playing baseball. Certainly defining his professional achievement is a central concern of the biographies.

Ruth revolutionized the game of baseball, and the biographies focus on how this came about. Smelser has a general statement of the state of offensive play before Ruth.

> Baseball was a neater and tidier game before the First World War than it was after. The single run had more value because it was harder to get with the old dead ball. When Ruth came to play, batters were hitting well below their averages of the 1890s. Players won games by outwitting the other team and by trying to place their hits. They even practiced getting hit by pitched balls. (p. 61)

At this time, Ruth's specialty, the home run, was not regarded as an important offensive weapon. Sobol comments that "a home run was almost invariably the result of a defensive mistake, such as failing to cut off a line drive or playing a hitter improperly," then quotes a disgruntled Boston sportswriter who complained "after a game in which [Ruth] had struck out on three straight bad pitches in the bottom of the ninth with the winning runs on base, . . . about his misguided efforts to 'send the ball out of the park instead of between two fielders"' (pp. 71-2). To many, the increasing frequency of the home run meant that the game was degenerating, as Creamer points out (pp. 106-7).

But fans were quick to change their minds about this, and, as Creamer remarks (all the biographers comment on this) "the game changed more between 1917 and 1921 than it did in the next forty years" (p. 217). Smelser has the most detailed analysis of the change, worth quoting here.

> Ruth changed people's minds about batting. Before he exploded into fame theory had it that a full swing lessened the batter's accuracy and helped the pitcher to the same degree, though there had been a few exceptions. Most of the great hitters—personified by Ty Cobb–used a short swing or chopped as if using an axe. They stepped forward to meet the ball in front of the plate. They not only feared to lose accuracy but thought the long swing would make them lose balance. Ruth changed that. His near-perfect eyesight, timing, and coordination let him get full power into the swing *with* precision. Others have since found it possible, but in 1919 and 1920 Ruth was thought to be a freak. . .
>
> Ruth also changed the nature of the game as spectacle. When he came to bat the combat zone shrank to the ground between mound and home plate. He made the fans much more conscious of the war between pitcher and batter. For the minutes he stood there waving his bat the game was a contest between two men instead of eighteen. And if Ruth hit the ball out of the park the pitcher was defeated, not by a team but by Ruth. (pp. 178-9)

How do these biographers account for this change? What circumstances account for Ruth's being the figure to make this innovation? All the biographers offer the information that Ruth patterned his hitting style after Joe Jackson, but the fact that Jackson, in his best home run season (1920) averaged a home run every fifty at bats, while Ruth, over his career, hit one every twelve official at bats, suggests the limitations of this accounting. Smelser suggests that Ruth may have learned something from Brother Mathias at St. Mary's which enabled him to become the revolutionary hitter (p.28), but this too seems unlikely. Robert Creamer suggests the fact that he was a pitcher at the beginning of his career also helped him develop his style, a theory also advanced by Ty Cobb. Creamer says:

> He ignored the fashion of the times, which was to protect the plate and punch out singles. He swung from the heels. Good pitchers did not have too much trouble with him except when they were careless. Then the big swing hurt them and sent their outfielders, who played much closer to the infield then they do today, scurrying to the fences after his seeming plethora of triples. (pp. 76-77; Cobb is quoted on p. 109)

All these circumstances (and more) combined with the sort of person he was, led to the revolution in batting style.

And how was it, we might ask, that Babe Ruth—a premier pitcher—became a slugging outfielder? Here our biographers quarrel a bit. Robert Smith says that “Edward Barrow, . . . was a man with an eye for a good hitter and a determination to get as much power into the outfield as he could, even if it meant overworking the club’s best left-handed pitcher” (p.50). But the others tell a different story. Both Wagenheim and Creamer quote Barrow’s response to Harry Hooper’s suggestion that Ruth be put in the outfield: “Why, I’d be the laughing stock of the league if I put its best lefthander in the outfield.” Clearly, circumstances had to dictate Ruth be moved, for Barrow knew enough baseball to see that he was more valuable as a pitcher. Smelser is probably right to say that “the collaboration of Ed Barrow and Babe Ruth in converting a pitcher to a master of the whole game was the most influential single act in baseball history since the decision to pitch overhand instead of underhand” (p.551). But again, circumstance, rather than strategy, seems to have dictated the move.

Smelser also points out Ruth showed “a special quality that excited the public and brought them back to the park. Many players, some of them great, played baseball with care; with cunning, with artistry, perhaps even with science, but Ruth, above all other players, lived baseball with joy” (p. 117). Ken Sobol remarks the appearance of “a significant new kind of statistic . . . alongside Ruth’s name” in the following report, “25,000 persons watched Babe Ruth add two more home runs to his total, and then drive over the run that won the contest” (p.96). Finally, Ruth interests us because of his celebrity.

He certainly was celebrated. One sportswriter called him “a figure out of mythology.’’ He was the leading cause of an extraordinary increase in interest in major league baseball. Smelser argues that:

> The year 1920 was the opening of a decade in which sport came out into the daylight of classless acceptance. Baseball, in particular, was a running adventure story with new climaxes almost every day, and the players seemed mostly heroes or wizards. In the hot days of the summer of 1920 almost every move on the green and tan fields brought shouts from tens of thousands. That was

> the time, as Paul Gallico put it, of a "fantastic competitive cosmos in which nothing ever seemed more important than who won, what was the score, who did it, and how." William Wrigley, Jr., the owner of the Cubs, believed the sixteen major-league clubs needed forty stars among them to draw crowds. Of the players of 1920, more than thirty have been voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. It was a vintage year. (p. 167)

Of course this sort of thing does not simply happen, and part of the importance of our books lies in what is to be found out about how the celebrity Ruth was created and sustained.

Ken Sobol, who presents the least attractive picture of Ruth himself, is perhaps best at this dimension of Ruth's life. His book begins with a portrait of Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Ruth's agent Christy Walsh on a barnstorming tour after the 1927 season, presumably at a time when Ruth was most merchandisable. Sobol writes:

> On the evening of the 29th, a calm, balmy night, the tour came to rest in Los Angeles. Ruth perked up immediately. It was like coming home. Los Angeles, which to Ruth meant Hollywood, was a place in which he could feel comfortable. L. A. was high living, publicity crazy, superactive, full of great broads, and always pushing everything to excess. (p. 19)

Sobol also clearly enjoys painting his portrait of the New York sportswriters waiting for Ruth to arrive in New York in 1920. He sees Ruth the celebrity as a product of their work. Enjoy this paragraph of nicknames from Wagenheim:

> He was the king. The boys in the pressbox stepped up their feverish competition to describe the indescribable. He was the Big Bambino, the Mauling Mastodon, the Behemoth of Bust, The Mammoth of Maul, the Colossus of Clout, the Sultan of Swat, a Modern Beowulf, the Prince of Pounders, the Mauling Monarch, the Bulby Bambino, the Blunderbuss, the Mauling Menace, the Rajah of Rap, the Wazir of Wham! One writer, doubtlessly fueled by a flask of bootleg hooch, called him a "dauntless devastating demon" who hit "clangorous clouts"! (p. 71)

Though Ruth was the beneficiary of free publicity from the sports pages, these books also reveal that he had a shrewd business manager in Christy Walsh and a second wife with shrewd business sense in Claire Hogsdon Ruth. The work of these two insured that Ruth, one of the great "big spenders," would have enough money left to live on after he retired as a player. The endorsements found by Walsh for Ruth read rather like a list of his nicknames. The following is from Sobol, (p. 168).

> Before long ads for modish men's wear, alligator shoes, hunting and fishing equipment, baseball gear, smoking paraphernalia, and racy automobiles featuring the unqualified endorsement of the Behemoth of Biff were appearing regularly in the New York papers.
>
> The fact that Ruth had endorsed Cadillac Automobiles in New York in no way precluded him from trumpeting the virtues of Packards in Boston, or Reos in St. Louis. In each new city Walsh put Babe up for grabs to the highest bidder, and if he happened to be plumping for a competitor of the product he had endorsed the day before somewhere else, well, who cared? If he spoke out in

> favor of Dr. Reed's Cushion Shoes in one town, it was only fair that he put in a good word for Crawford's Orthopedics in the next.

Wagenheim (p. 153) also tells, hilariously, a story involving Ruth's demanding and getting a $1,000 fee for standing for an hour next to a pile of underwear in a department store.

Even with Walsh, Mrs. Ruth, and the sportswriters working full time, it was a job keeping a man with Ruth's appetites respectable enough to be marketable. Perhaps the most extraordinary example of this was the Elks Club dinner given by Ruth (and arranged by Walsh) for the sportswriters after the disastrous 1922 season. This dinner featured a decidedly bucolic motif (a large figure of a cow was a prominent prop) plus plenty of protestations on Ruth's part that he intended to behave himself in the future. But, as Smelser suggests, it was not until 1926 that he could be said to have his life under control. The following from Smelser is the most serious effort to account for Ruth's celebrity.

> The rage for Ruth was part of the shift from puritan values. Americans had become a consuming people who hungered for instant pleasures. These hedonists were never so sinlessly employed as when they enjoyed the play of their athletic heroes and made of them celebrities. It seems impossible to build lasting celebrity by trickery. The people select durable heroes by mysterious ways. In the case of Babe Ruth in 1920 he no doubt profited by war-weariness and, coincidentally, from some technological aids to communications: the reflex camera for action photography, the Graphophone for records of his voice, and the motion picture for newsreel clips. Nevertheless, celebrity will not last without, the consent of the people. The people of 1920 were casting off restraints. Ruth, more than any other, helped to make their national game less restrained.
>
> Babe Ruth's smashing offensive style of play brought him popular acceptance by acclamation. In the postpuritan age after the First World War the great defensive play of the prewar years lost out. The loosely constructed game with explosive scoring was the people's choice. The tightly disciplined play of the age of Cobb and McGraw fell back before Ruth's bat. The seventeen-inning errorless 1-0 game, with the run scored by a scratch hit, a bunt, a steal, and a suicide squeeze, had been a puritan delight from the days of the fabulous Baltimore Orioles of the 1890s up to the First World War. But the 1l-10 game, with, say, four home runs, better suited the mood of the people of 1920 and after. (p. 170)

In summary, we turn to another novel, this one published in 1973, with the peculiar title *Babe Ruth Caught in a Snowstorm,* by John Alexander Graham. The story concerns the rise and fall of the Wichita Wraiths, who play their home games in Braintree, Massachusetts. The club is the brainchild of an entrepreneur named Slezak, who forms the club for noble purposes: he wants to run a non-profit public service organization. The team is a success, joins the National League, and is in first place when the bad effects of the bureaucratic organization Slezak has added begin to be seen. The book ends with a meelee between players and office personnel. The book is clearly an effort to satirize the economic and social structure of modern America.

The Babe-Ruth-caught-in-a-snowstorm of the title is actually a good luck paperweight owned by Slezak. Symbolic, it is part of the book's satirical apparatus. At the beginning of the book it is simply a physical object. Slezak tells us about it.

> On my eighth birthday my father presented me with the cheap souvenir—which he must have casually picked up downtown somewhere—that was to become one of my most treasured possessions. It was nothing more than a glass ball on a plastic stand, the kind of thing that often has the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building inside, and when you shake it up you get a snowstorm. Only this one, instead of the Statue of Liberty, had a figurine of the former Yankee great finishing up one of those breeze-rippling home-run cuts he was justly famous for. (p. 35)

By the end of the book this paperweight has picked up considerable symbolic value and during a climactic interview between Slezak and Petashne, one of his star players and the narrator of part of the book, Petashne picks up the paperweight and wonders what it is. We find out first that Slezak has forgotten about it, which tells us that it is a symbol of his original intentions in forming the ballclub, which have been lost in its commercialization. A "souvenir of a bygone era." Slezak calls it. Petashne shakes the paperweight, producing a thick snowstorm around the figure of Ruth so thick "you could hardly see him anymore.'' Petashne thinks the whole situation peculiar. He wants to know "what in the world is he doing playing ball in the middle of a blizzard?" The author asks the same question of us all. Ruth here appears as a symbol of natural man at play, obscured by the snow of commerce around him. It is perhaps Ruth's greatest achievement that this was not true—his biographers tell us this—of his actual life.

It remains to say a few words in order to differentiate between the five biographies. Robert Smith's *Babe Ruth's America* is, as its title indicates, the most ambitious of the five books, and perhaps should not even be compared with the others since it does not attempt to match them in detailing Babe Ruth's life. Ruth becomes the central character in a brightly written social history of much of the twentieth century. Smith's informing principle in the book is a sympathy for the common man, and this makes it happy reading, but not always coherent social history. Kal Wagenheim's *Babe Ruth: His Life and Legend* tells the story briefly with a lively sense of the appropriate anecdote, and his book is an excellent one for the beginner, Robert W. Creamer's *Babe: The Legend Comes to Life* may be the best of the lot. It's well written and full of convincing insight and detail. This reviewer prefers the tandem of Marshall Smelser's *The Life That Ruth Built* and Ken Sobol's *Babe Ruth and the American Dream.* Smelser's is majestic and leisurely and much longer than any of the others (some will think it overlong); Sobol's is perky, hard-hitting, short. Many dislike it because of the negative portrait of Babe Ruth it contains. And in fact the two writers seem to circle each other warily on the subject of Ruth the person. One of the limitations of Smelser's book is the intense dislike he takes to Miller Huggins, Ruth's Yankee manager in the twenties; to Sobol, Huggins is a hero for putting up with Ruth. But what unites Smelser and Sobol is the loving attention they both give to the game of baseball, and in this they (all five) come closest in spirit to the Babe.