

Book Reviews

*The strength of criticism lies in the
weakness of the thing criticized.*
H. W. Longfellow

Clark, Tom. *Champagne and Baloney: The Rise and Fall of Finley's A's*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976. Pp. 432. Index, appendix, pictures. \$10.95.

Ever since they wrested control of baseball from the players back in 1876 major league club owners have had a major say in shaping the course and growth of the game. Sometimes their leadership was innovative, positive and praiseworthy; more often owners were criticized for wrongheaded blunders, petty authoritarianism and for putting profit and vainglory first. Now after a century of hapless submission players have united behind their formidable Association and have regained much of their lost power. Hence, Director Marvin Miller's recent observation, "The owners are unnecessary" has a persuasive ring.

Like Dorian Gray the owners labored long to build this negative image, but many blotches were added by controversial characters within their ranks. As examples, one could cite Chris Von Der Ahe, Andrew Freedman, Charles Comiskey, Jerry Nugent, Ray Kroc, Gus Busch—enough, for the list could easily be expanded. Yet surprisingly enough owner biographies, either adulatory or critical, are virtually nonexistent which makes for an astonishing gap in baseball history.

Happily this is not the case for Charles O. Finley, easily the most controversial and pilloried owner of recent times. Indeed, the man who built the Oakland Athletics into a championship dynasty and then ingloriously allowed them to become the majors's most notorious "basket case" has been the subject of two popular biographies. Of these Tom Clark's, *Champagne and Baloney* is the better, but it was inspired by Herb Michelson's earlier work (*The Mustache Gang*, Dell, 1972) and expands upon that work.

Clark is a professional poet with 15 published poesies and a long career as a teacher and as poetry editor of the *Paris Review*. A life long love affair with baseball and the A's is the muse behind this effort. Although he cites no sources save occasionally in passing, it is obvious that he has done his home-

work and has culled a variety of journalistic accounts on Finley and his rebellious hirelings. These are neatly interwoven into a breezy narrative, which is captivatingly activated by his choice of the present tense and by frequent colloquialisms and earthy quotes of which Reggie Jackson's characterization of Finley as "that big asshole" is a titillating example.

Obviously many of Finley's contemporaries share this view; so many, indeed, that Clark allows their outraged diatribes to shape the reader's judgment. Of these it would be hard to beat these searing words of Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri that appeared in the *Congressional Record* in 1967 when Finley won the right to move the A's from Kansas City to Oakland: Charles Finley is one of the most disreputable characters ever to enter the American sports scene. . . . The loss of the A's is more than recompensed by the pleasure of getting rid of Mr. Finley. . . . Oakland is the luckiest city since Hiroshima." (P.67)

Still this is more than a denunciatory biography of Finley; just as much it is the story of the A's team. Finley himself was not interviewed and Clark relies on journalistic sources which quote many of Finley's utterances.

Finley appears as a hard-driving, self-centered man who surmounted blue collar origins to become a wealthy insurance broker. His fortune made, he set out to win social recognition as a baseball owner. After several rebuffs, he purchased the lowly A's and set forth to make them champions, a successful quest that comprises the bulk of Clark's narrative.

Indeed, Oakland's three consecutive world titles stands as a matchless feat of the Expansion Era. For this Finley deserves much credit as he hired the scouts and paid the bonuses to the young draftees who blossomed and matured into champions.

As a promoter Finley braved ridicule and introduced such positive innovations as colorful uniforms, zany promotional schemes, corny player nicknames that caught on, and the designated hitter rule. But these successes and some inspired failures like his proposals for interleague play, shortened seasons, and designated runners were lost in a flood of ridicule unleashed by his abrasive personality.

Certainly Finley was his own worst enemy. Pride in the form of a Jehovah complex had him decrying fellow owners and the Commissioner as "idiots" and managers as "nobodies." His contempt for the latter led him to hire and fire a dozen by 1975. Worse, he displayed a paranoid contempt for his players and the fans of Kansas City and Oakland. Predictably, both constituencies turned on him, dragged him down and turned him into a pariah. In renegeing on Catfish Hunter's contract, Finley blundered, setting a precedent that helped to overturn the reserve clause. And by stubbornly trying to punish Oakland

fans for failing to appear in droves, he turned Oakland into a baseball ghost town.

But this last statement goes beyond the limits of Clark's highly readable narrative. Clark's account ends with Oakland's defeat in the 1975 American League playoff series. At the time Oakland had won five consecutive Western division titles; yet the "fall of Finley's A's" as prophesied in Clark's title is a foregone conclusion.

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