

Steele, Michael R. *Knute Rockne: A Bio-Bibliography*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983. Pp. xii, 318. Index, bibliography, appendixes, notes, illustration. \$35.00

Knute Rockne—another book on Knute Rockne. There must be something important about an immigrant Norse Protestant turned Norwegian Catholic who pastured around the Golden Dome of the University of Notre Dame, successfully continuing a winning tradition which has set Notre Dame apart from other colleges as the American football factory. Yale was the nineteenth century jock school emphasizing football—Notre Dame has carried that distinction for much of the twentieth century. Rockne helped put the Golden Domers on the Athletic map as an undergraduate pass receiving phenomenon (Dorais to Rockne). He continued as their field leader from 1918 to 1930 becoming the winningest major football coach in college annals (105-12-5), winning 90 percent of his games. And many individuals, most of whom have their eyes rosey-glazed from the glow of the Golden Dome, continue to revel in the light of Rockne. Well enough, for most of us live lives mixed with myth as well as proven fact. As Michael Steele points out in *Knute Rockne: A Bio-Bibliography*, much of the Rockne writing is myth. The question is, can an English professor, football devotee, and Notre Dame alumnus divest himself from Notre Dame and the Rockne myth to tell the real story?

Steele attempts to do this in a biography-bibliography, part of Greenwood Press' "Popular Culture Bio-bibliography" series. The volume is divided into

six parts, three of which are unique. Included is probably the most complete bibliography of Rockne writings in existence. Second, Steel has analyzed the major works by and about Rockne. Third, he has included five interviews with knowledgeable Notre Damers—Moose Krause, Richard Sullivan, Chet Grant, Paul Castner, and Herb Juliano. Steele is at his best in his analysis of other's works, which one might expect of an English professor. In a less successful way Steele presents in two lengthy chapters his biography of Rockne and an analysis of "Rockne's Impact on Sports and American Popular Culture."

Steele's biographical chapter is written almost entirely from secondary sources, which, because of that, lacks credulity. In discussing Rockne's impact on American culture, Steele unfortunately attempts to compare Rockne to the ideals of ancient Greek society. The ancient Greek ideal is too lofty for either Rockne or Steele's writing to mount. But for the Notre Dame alums who still love the "Irish," they will enjoy reading this book as it shows the Notre Dame myth to be alive and well and living in the heart if not the mind.

Myth, or unproven collective belief used to justify social institutions, appears to be important to Michael Steele both to dispel and to promulgate. That is the paradox of the volume. Steele tries to dispel some of the exaggerated claims surrounding Rockne. To this end he shows, to an historian's surprise, that players Rockne and Dorais did not invent the forward pass against Army in the famous 1913 game; that Rockne did not often use fiery speeches to inflame his charges to victory; that the evidence around "win one for the Gipper" is not clear; that the Notre Dame shift idea did not arise after Rockne saw a New York Ziegfield Follies line of chorus girls; that Rockne did not wait until after his mother's death to convert to Catholicism. To this end Steele serves a useful purpose in critically surveying previous writers on Rockne.

Yet, at the same time Steele contributes to the Rockne myth with numerous of his own overstatements. To wit: "Rockne may be given credit for the game's widespread acceptance" (p.25) and "Rockne provided a measure of significance to a game that had not possessed it before." (p. 137) [The game was already the supreme college game well before Rockne entered college, not to say entered the coaching ranks.] Rockne's "death would make him America's first martyr of sport." (p. 18) [Certainly a coach who dies in a plane crash on the way to a speech can hardly be termed a martyr—a martyr for what cause? A hero's death, likely.] "Rockne stood for all that seemed right about America." (p. 13) [Even Steele acknowledges among other character flaws that Rockne used numerous jokes at public speaking engagements derogatory to blacks, feeble-minded, and homosexuals.] (pp. 133-34) "No one else in the history of the game ever produced more head coaches than Rockne did." (p. 119) [Steele almost surely did not count former Yale players of Walter Camp who coached, and he probably did not do his homework regarding Paul "Bear" Bryant.] These are only a few of the overstatements which pepper the volume.

Author Steele rather nicely sums up both the strength and weakness of the book which is centered around myths. Steele states that:

The living Rockne was to a large extent his own creation. The mythical Rockne is generally the American public's Rockne. In studying the former, we better understand Rockne. In studying the latter, we better understand ourselves. (p. 136)

It seems probable that Steele understands Rockne better than he understands himself. If not, how else can we reconcile Steele's conclusion that "it was sportsmanship, the athlete's Golden Rule that Rockne preached. . ." (p. 50) with his revelation that Rockne was "not above calling a time out for an imaginary injury in an important moment in a game"? (p. 212) Even though Steele knows that Rockne was mortal, and shows us from time to time that he was, he cannot conclude that Rockne was one of us—mere mortal man who was a successful coach at a university which stressed football. Why is this so? Late in the volume Steele gives us his version of history. "The act of writing history is," says Steele, "to some extent, an exercise in mythology." (p. 189)

The volume suffers to some extent because Steele is more concerned with the myths surrounding football, Notre Dame, and Rockne than with historical accuracy. For historical evidence, he leaves almost completely untouched a perusal of newspaper accounts of Rockne and Notre Dame football, except for the plethora of obituary and post-mortem evaluations. He further exacerbates two major football myths by repeating twice the apocryphal legend of William Webb Ellis who, while a student at the Rugby Public School in England, picked up the ball and ran with it, thus creating Rugby football. (p. 57, 79) In the other, Steele claims that President Theodore Roosevelt saved the game of football from ruination early in the century. (p. 194) He shows no evidence for either assertion.

While errors creep into almost every book, *Knute Rockne: A Bio-Bibliography* has more than its share. Steele has Yale building the Yale Bowl in the 1920's when, in fact, it was constructed before the U.S. entry into World War I. (p. 71) He has headmaster Thomas Arnold leading Rugby School in 1823 at the time of the supposed Webb Ellis exploits. He was wrong on the Webb Ellis myth, and Arnold wasn't there until later. (p. 57) Steele sees William Foster's 1915 article as one of the first to suggest abolishment of football, when evidence shows that it was not an uncommon suggestion a generation before. (p. 69) He is mistaken in believing that Rockne's athletic career spanned the change from teams being run by captains to the time professional coaches would be supreme figures. (p. 90) In actuality the pro coach's becoming supreme was a pre-NCAA (1906) phenomenon. Even prior to the creation of the NCAA, a Harvard coach was paid considerably more than the highest paid full professor at that leading institution. He further lacks historical perspective when he states that football was an "informal sport" early in the twentieth century, growing to "an institutionalized, profitable venture" by the time of the Rockne era. (p. 113) The major problem for Steele is that he

tries too hard to make college football and Rockne one and the same. Because college football in America was so well established by 1900, one might better conclude that an individual as capable as Rockne might well take a leadership role, even an heroic one, by the 1920's in a midwestern university, but he certainly did not create the modern game.

Coaches, such as Amos Alonzo Stagg at Chicago, Percy Houghton at Harvard, James Counsilman at Indiana, John Wooden at UCLA, and Bear Bryant at Alabama, will likely always stand larger than life. Rockne is no exception, for he was the winningest football coach in the 1920's. That Michael Steele has attempted to make more of Rockne than other great coaches may be unfortunate. It profiteth little to state as Steele does, that Vince Lombardi "did not sit astride our popular culture as Rockne did," to make Rockne the paragon of football coaches. Neither, one might add, was Lombardi a Notre Dame graduate nor a college head coach. One could, though, agree with Steele who believes that Coles Phinizy's two part series in *Sports Illustrated* (September 10 and 17, 1979) stands "as the pinnacle of revisionism in the literature about Rockne." (p. 188)

Pennsylvania State University

Ronald A. Smith