

Murdock, Eugene C. *Ban Johnson: Czar of Baseball*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982. Pp. xii, 299. Pictures, notes, bibliographical essay, and index. \$29.95.

Ban Johnson held a very low opinion of George Herman Ruth. In 1922 he wrote Ruth, reprimanding Babe for his ungentlemanly behavior. It seems Ruth had used some coarse language during a heated discussion with an umpire. Johnson wrote, "Your conduct . . . was reprehensible to a great degree-shocking to every American mother who permits her boy to go to a game. . . It is a leading question as to whether it is permissible to allow a man of your influence and breeding to continue in the game. . . . A man of your stamp bodes no good in the profession." The quote was vintage Johnson-self-righteous, dictatorial, obsessively concerned with the image of the game. It contains Johnson's vision of baseball: a cleanly-played game played by smartly-dressed, honorably-acting men for the entertainment of America's puritanically-minded broad middle class. There was no place for vulgar, tobacco-chewing, swaggering swearers in Johnson's concept of "big league" baseball. For these reasons Johnson attacked rowdy behavior by the ballplayers and improved the status of umpires.

Eugene Murdock's biography is a welcomed edition to the growing literature on baseball. It is well-grounded in the primary sources; Murdock made use of archival materials at the National Baseball Library at Cooperstown, Marietta College, and Oberlin College, as well as contemporary newspapers, autobiographies, family records, and numerous interviews. He did a thoroughly professional, scholarly job in the research of the book.

Ban Johnson is also welcomed because of its subject. It is time for historians to take a closer look at the economic, administrative, and managerial levels of sport. In terms of understanding the impact of sports on American society, administrative policy is likely to be more important than the heroics on the fields. Although I question some of Murdock's conclusions about the importance of Johnson to the history of baseball, I applaud his efforts.

As Murdock shows, the essential tragedy of Ban Johnson "was that he did not leave when his work was done. By remaining in office while shorn of his old power, he invited the final indignity" (p. xii). Johnson well served baseball, and particularly the American League. He led his junior league during the great baseball war with National League with skill and imagination. He recruited good ballplayers and obtained stable backing. Until 1927 he served as the president of the American League, and between 1903 and 1920 he was one of the greatest forces in organized baseball. He *was* important. The question is just how important.

Murdock claims that Johnson "was the foremost of the founding fathers of baseball" (p. xi). In this as in other areas. I suspect Murdock has adopted Johnson's own line. Although Murdock certainly does not engage in hagiography. I suspect he has fallen-or at least occasionally slipped-into the greatest of all of the biographer's pitfalls: he has become too close to his sub-

ject. This is easy enough to do. It is difficult to live with a subject for a long period of time without becoming personally involved with that subject. Johnson should have been seen as a prototype of the Gilded Age political boss or industrialist. He could be engaging, scientifically progressive, intelligent, but he lusted for power and had little feel for the masses (i.e. ballplayers). When it came to player unions or contract disputes, Johnson showed a cold, undemocratic face. Perhaps a Marxist perspective would be the best lense through which to view the life of Johnson.

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