

Polner, Murray. *Branch Rickey: A Biography*. New York: Atheneum, 1982. Pp. x. 307. Index, \$14.95.

Few figures in sport history offer richer potential for the biographer than baseball executive Branch Rickey. Rickey is best known for signing Jackie Robinson and ending organized baseball's longstanding racial barriers. But even without this historic act Rickey would rank among the great figures in the evolution of the national pastime. The creator of both the farm system and the collegiate-style spring training camp, Rickey also spearheaded major league expansion in the 1960s with the formation of the short-lived Continental League. A visionary among the traditionalist baseball hierarchy, Rickey's flamboyant theatrics-one commentator called him a cross between Billy Sunday and P. T. Barnum-made him one of the game's more colorful and controversial figures.

Rickey left an apparent treasure trove of materials-notes, memoranda, and mementos—which his family donated to the Library of Congress with the stipulation that journalist Murray Polner, their choice as Rickey's biographer, be granted exclusive use of the papers until 1985. The result is *Branch Rickey: A Biography*, an uninspired and irritatingly inaccurate account of the life of baseball's "Mahatma."

Despite his access to new sources, Polner adds little to the familiar outlines of the Rickey story. Polner describes Rickey's impoverished childhood in Ohio, his ultimately successful efforts to get a college education, and his early careers as baseball player, college coach, and major league manager. By the 1920s Rickey had found his true calling as the innovative general manager of the St. Louis Cardinals. A shrewd entrepreneur, Rickey produced both pennants and profits, first in St. Louis, where he developed the farm system, and later with the Brooklyn Dodgers, where he recruited Robinson. By the 1950s, however, the magic had vanished and his less fortunate experiences with the Pittsburgh

Pirates and back again with the Cardinals, somewhat tarnished the Rickey legend.

Polner's shortcomings derive not from any lack of effort or diligence. In addition to the Rickey Papers, he consulted dozens of newspapers, journals, and archives and interviewed several score of Rickey's contemporaries. Polner's failure lies in his inability to distinguish fact from fancy and record from reminiscence and his unwillingness to go beyond the familiar outlines of the Rickey saga by analyzing and interpreting the events and actions of his life.

Polner's disregard for accuracy is notably apparent in his section on the integration of baseball. In one six page account of Robinson's 1946 season I counted at least eight factual errors. Take, for example, Polner's version of the Little World Series between the Montreal Royals and the Louisville Colonels. Polner writes that the Royals lost the first three games in Louisville (they lost two of three) and won four straight in Montreal (they won three straight to clinch a six game series). He identifies Al Campanis as an "observer," rather than as the Montreal shortstop and places black pitcher Roy Partlow in the Montreal locker room, although Partlow had been cut from the team in June. Taken individually these errors are acceptable, collectively, and in conjunction with later errors, they cast doubt on Polner's scholarship.

Time and again Polner uses quotations out of their chronological sequence, misdates player transactions, and apparently accepts the oral testimony of his witnesses even when they run counter to all other accounts of the story. Polner's description of Robinson's first visit to Baltimore (which he incorrectly places as a pre-season exhibition game) ends with black fans carrying Robinson off the field on their shoulders, an occurrence which would have embarrassed both Rickey and Robinson, and is confirmed by neither Robinson's numerous biographical recollections nor contemporary newspaper accounts of the event. Nor does Polner seem aware of contradictions in his own writing. He places the Dodger 1948 training camp in Florida, but seven pages later he correctly locates it in the Dominican Republic. He describes Bill Veeck's efforts to integrate the Philadelphia Phillies in 1943 but concludes that Rickey was the only person to "seriously consider" signing blacks.

Polner also fails to address the key contradictions inherent in Rickey's life. An avowed prohibitionist, Rickey surrounded himself with tempestuous, intemperate, yet talented assistants. A preacher of moralism and religion, Rickey faced repeated criticisms for a lack of scruples in his business dealings. A lifelong conservative, Rickey became the beacon of liberal hopes and dreams in the nation through the Robinson signing. Polner makes no attempts to unravel the internal workings of Rickey's highly successful farm system or to examine Rickey's motivations in integrating baseball. Of the latter episode he simply concludes "the fact is that before Branch Rickey no one had done it," a truism which neither explains nor illuminates.

The most unfortunate aspect of this volume is that several of Polner's gleanings from the Rickey Papers could provide new insights into Rickey's character and the history of baseball. Given the high level of inaccuracy,

however, and the lack of any source documentation, one must tread carefully before accepting Polner's accounts. Yet all is not lost. The Rickey Papers are now open to the public, awaiting another, perhaps more careful and creative biographer.

San Francisco State University

Jules Tygiel