

Hynd, Noel. *The Giants of the Polo Grounds: The Glorious Times of Baseball's New York Giants*. New York: Doubleday, 1988. Pp. 396. \$18.95.

“The Giants? Are they still in the National League?” might be the innocent query of a latter-day Bill Terry who is long on sarcasm and short of memory. Aside from playoff appearances (and defeats) in 1971 and 1987 and a World Series appearance (and defeat) in 1962 the Giants of San Francisco (and Candlestick Park) have fielded almost perennial also-rans. It’s not likely that even a John McGraw could have hounded a San Francisco Giant team to victory. And it’s even less likely that a distraught Tony Bennett could imagine leaving a place of his heart for the ball park off the Bay.

Yes, the Giants of Candlestick are still—if barely—in the National League. There was, however, another Giant era, a time when certain giant Giants would speak derisively of lesser teams in lesser burroughs of the senior circuit. These were the Giants of the Polo Grounds, mainly the Giants of John McGraw and Leo Durocher, but also the Giants of Bill Terry and even of Mel Ott. (Amazing as it may seem in these days of revolving door managers, the New York Giants employed a grand total of four field managers between the 1902 arrival of the “Little Napoleon” and the 1955 self-imposed exile of the equally napoleonic Durocher. Who replaced Leo the Lip for the final two lackluster New York Giant campaigns? As that onetime Giant player and longtime Yankee manager, Casey Stengel, once said: “You can look it up.”)

Noel Hynd may be a Philadelphia resident and a University of Pennsylvania grad, but he writes of the original Giants with affection and verve. His is a history written for the layman, whether Giant fan or not; but this is also a history to be enjoyed by all fans, whether baseball scholars or not. Hynd is a writer first, a fan second, and a historian third. (The first two designations may be interchangeable, but the third remains stalled on third. No matter. The book deserves to be read for what it is, an engaging, animated account of the summer campaigns of a ball team that had more than its share of on-the-field success and at least its fair share of on-and-off-the-field characters.)

Readers of this book will encounter little in the way of over-arching theory, less in the way of historical hypothesizing, and nothing standing in the way of a good read. Hynd has not made a contribution to scholarship. He has, however, made a contribution of sorts to scholars, at least those scholars interested in sharpening their story-telling skills.

True, the book is based on a rather thin supply of secondary sources, including Lawrence Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times*. Yes, the subtitle may well have been borrowed from Ritter, but Hynd himself made no attempt to track down players or front office types associated with the Polo Grounds Giants. At times the result is uneven at best and confusing at worst. The pre-McGraw era is examined in painstaking detail, while the post-McGraw years are often consumed in undigested gulps. (Granted, there were many lean Giant-years sandwiched between Terry's 1933 world champions and Durocher's 1954 sweep of the Indians.)

The heart of the book is the John McGraw era itself. While not as thorough as the recent Charles Alexander biography of the fearsome Giant manager, it is a thorough pleasure to read. It also would have been mostly pleasing to McGraw himself. Hynd begins each chapter with a telling quote. By the time he is ready to launch into a discussion of the first McGraw era of greatness (1904 through 1913) he borrows from Connie Mack: "There has been only one manager and his name is McGraw."

Hynd's McGraw is "hard-driven" and "rambunctious." His McGraw is less relentless tyrant than forgiving father figure, whether the occasion be the Fred Merkle "boner" of 1908, the Fred Snodgrass dropped fly ball in the eighth and final game of the 1912 World Series, the Heinie Zimmerman futile run-down of Eddie Collins in the sixth and final game of the 1917 World Series, or the slow, tragic death of his beloved Christy Mathewson.

If any Giant manager is not to Hynd's liking it was the remote Bill Terry who nonetheless managed the Giants to three league pennants and a 1933 series victory in his ten years at the helm. Unlike Leo the Lip, Terry was a man of few words, too few perhaps to endear himself to any writer. Durocher, on the other hand, could seldom keep quiet. Sometimes his Open Mouth strategy was the correct one, as in the case of the nonstop encouragement he offered to a frightened rookie named Willie Mays.

For a brief time the Durocher approach worked no magic at all. During his first agonizing days as a Giant Mays wept on the bench, begged to be returned to Minneapolis, and went 0 for 12. Then Durocher uttered the few words that finally seemed to matter: "You're my center fielder . . . Just go out and play baseball." The next day Leo threw Willie to the hawks in the form of Warren Spahn, whose delivery "somehow resembled a huge beer pretzel coming unraveled" (that's Hynd's description, not Durocher's). It would be the first, but far from the last, meeting between the two.

When the count reached 1-1, both Spahn and Mays were apparently thinking along the same line: curve ball. As a result, the ball "did not jump, fly, waft, or arc" off Mays' bat. "It simply soared . . . until it reached Connecticut . . . For half a second, the players and crowd could only moan in admiration. Then the center field bleachers let loose with something that sounded like thunder, and it rolled inward across the grandstands in a matter of a second or two until the entire crowd, even the businessmen in their regular box seats, was roaring in one grand ovation." The month was "May, and the year was 1951. "It was,"

concluded Hynd, “the first significant hit in the most dramatic pennant race in the history of American baseball.” Come October 3, 1951, it would be Bobby Thomson’s turn to make baseball fans wonder whether Brooklyn still wanted to be in the National League.

No history of the New York Giants would be complete without another rendering of that playoff of playoffs. Even so, the days of the Giants of the Polo Grounds were already numbered. Yes, there would be another pennant and a final world series win in 1954. Yes, the Giants would stumble on for a few more years—to September 29, 1957, to be exact. At that moment the New York Giants weren’t even dead. They were, according to Hynd, simply “gone.” After the final game (a 9-1 loss to the Pirates) the gates to the Polo Grounds were padlocked, Mrs. John McGraw was escorted to her home, and Horace Stoneham joined Walter O’Malley on the hit lists of aggrieved New Yorkers.

Whoever said “time heals all wounds” must not have known any real Giant or Dodger fans. For that matter, whoever responded “time wounds all heels” will not find Leo Durocher getting his deserved comeuppance in this book. But readers will discover—or rediscover—that the New York Giants *were* once in the National League. Noel Hynd has seen to that. In fact, he’s done his job so well that he’s wrong. The real Giants may still be dead, but from now on they’ll never be gone.

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