

Murdock, Eugene. *Baseball Players and Their Times: Oral Histories of the Game, 1920-1940*. Westport, CT: Meckler. 1991. Pp. xxi, 352. Photographs, index. \$37.50

Eugene Murdock has done us a favor. Through his foresight and diligence, he has preserved a portion of the game of baseball that, once gone, can never be replaced. He has taken it upon himself to interview numerous professional baseball players from the era of the 1920s and/or the 1930s in an effort to preserve their stories. This, indeed, is a valuable service; as of the writing of this book, only four of the twenty-two gentlemen whose interviews appear in this book are still living. And with each passing goes a unique perspective on our national pastime that would be forever lost if not recorded.

This concern for preserving our history was expressed by the late author Alex Haley (*Roots*) to a gathering of faculty and students during this reviewer's graduate school days in the mid 1980s. Haley was adamant in stating that oral histories are a critical link to the past, and that there is nothing more important,

or more pressing, than for us to “interview” our parents, grandparents, etc., while they are yet living to glean information about our families. That knowledge would inevitably become irretrievable if we do not take the time and initiative to record it.

Eugene Murdock has seized the opportunity to interview some of our “grandfathers” who form our national roots in the game of baseball. But he has done this with a unique twist. Whereas most historians have sought to capture a picture of baseball as it was during a previous era by interviewing hall-of-famers and other recognized stars of the game, Murdock sought and obtained the perspective of a different set of ballplayers: the journeyman ballplayers. Indeed, a good number of those interviewed for this book were ballplayers who spent most if not all of their days in organized baseball at the minor league level. Murdock related that many of these ballplayers were genuinely surprised that anyone would be interested in interviewing them. These were the men who had to rely on their wits as well as every last ounce of their physical ability in order to remain in a game they truly loved. And love is the proper description of their emotion, for in that era ballplayers, particularly journeyman ballplayers, did not reap much financial gain from their status as professional athletes.

A phenomenon brought out in this book strongly illustrates the differences between baseball then and now. In reading these players’ stories, it almost seems as though some of these players “fell into” their role of being a professional baseball player. Certainly, the whole system of amateur baseball was much less formal then than it is now. By their comments, one gets the feeling that many of them played baseball as children and young adults simply for the love of the game with no thought in mind of being a professional baseball player. Theirs was a world that was not bombarded with an avalanche of televised sports. For many of them, they played in the first major league game they ever saw. Indeed, it would be difficult for a child in contemporary society to participate in sports and *not* have a professional career in mind. Sports news, whether it be the printed or electronic media, abounds with information concerning the tremendous financial rewards that are being lavished upon today’s professional athletes. It certainly increases the allure of being a professional athlete for today’s children. But for Murdock’s interviewees, there was no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. True, for some it was a way out of the coal mines or away from some other form of hard labor. But one gets the feeling that their overriding passion was their love affair with baseball. The fact that they could make a living at it during a part of their lives just made it that much better.

The biggest weakness of a book such as this is the problem with repetition. By interviewing so many people from the same time frame, repetition of some information is inevitable. But perhaps viewed from a different perspective, that could also be considered a strength. One interviewee corroborating the views of another interviewee does, indeed, add credence to what Murdock has written. Murdock related that he was often amazed at the clarity and accuracy of his interviewee’s recall of events that had occurred forty to sixty years in the past. By using the *Baseball Encyclopedia* as a reference, Murdock stated that any

errors in fact that he discovered were usually very minor in nature. This repetition does, though, seem to make the book sluggish at times.

Nonetheless, Murdock has succeeded in weaving a vivid tapestry of the world of baseball between the two great wars of this century. It is obvious to even the most casual reader that the author's heart and soul went into this book. One only needs to read the introductory pages of this book to understand the full impact of an undertaking involving the extensive use of oral histories. Eugene Murdock has combined hard work with a genuine love for our national pastime to produce a volume that is a worthy monument to our predecessors who, as unsung heroes, helped make baseball the great game that it is.

South Carolina State University

William R. Swanson