

Book Review Essay

Baseball: When the Ball and Most Everything Else Was White

Honig, Donald. *Baseball: When the Grass Was Real: Baseball From the Twenties to the Forties Told by the Men Who Played It* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993). Pp. 320. Illustrated, indexed. \$12.95 pb.

Honig, Donald. *Baseball Between the Lines: Baseball in the Forties and Fifties as Told by the Men Who Played It* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993). Pp. 252. Illustrated, indexed. \$10.95 pb.

Sport historians are very familiar with the value of oral history for research purposes, and even occasionally for classroom instruction. Twentieth-century historians have mainly utilized interviews to help flesh out their research, although there have also been monographs like William Rogosin's *Invisible Men: Life in the Negro Leagues* (1986) that primarily relied on oral testimony because of the paucity of traditional data. While most interviews are preserved in archives like the American Jewish Committee's Archives at the New York Public Library, or specialized oral history collections at Columbia University and UCLA, interviews on sporting topics have been published in scholarly journals like the *Journal of Sport History* and *American Jewish History*. Many interviews, especially those on baseball, have also been published in their entirety in books. As Susan Cahn has recently pointed out, baseball far surpassed any other area in the use of oral history, especially in such subjects as women's baseball and the negro leagues where the usual sources of newspapers and manuscript collections are of limited utility. Many of these baseball publications were popular works of the "tell it like it was" genre in which participants gave their version of notable events, and then the author edited their reminiscences into a book like Peter Golenbock's *Bums: An Oral History of the Brooklyn Dodgers* (1984), or Thomas Hauser's work.¹

Even before scholars began taking advantage of oral history in their research, the genre of the "interview book" was already established in baseball history. The classic example was Lawrence S. Ritter, *The Glory of Their Times: The Story of the Early Days of Baseball Told by the Men Who Played*

1. See Susan Cahn, "Sports Talk: Oral History and Its Uses, Problems, and Possibilities for Sport History," *Journal of American History*, 81 (September 1994): 594-609.

It (1966) which offered its readers memories of former major leaguers who were active in the early twentieth century and whose voices had been largely forgotten. Ritter, who is professor emeritus of finance at NYU, actually began the book as a summer project with his son who shared a love of baseball. There was originally no expectation of putting this together into a book. Ritter's interviews did far more than capture the spirit of the big league game, the players' zest for the sport, and their fascinating anecdotes. Ritter's volume also provided careful readers with important evidence about his subject's social background, values, and behavior, not to mention some of their remarkable sociological insights. This was particularly true of the interview with Harry Hooper, a former collegiate star who became a Hall of Fame outfielder with the Boston Red Sox. His interview clearly showed that ballplayers were not the unsophisticated, uncivilized tubes as they were often portrayed.

Inspired by Ritter, and following in his footsteps, author Donald Honig in the spring of 1974 interviewed players of more recent vintage. The first volume, *Baseball When the Grass Was Real*, which covered the 1920s-1940s, was originally published in 1975, and *Baseball Between the Lines*, which discusses baseball in the 1940s-1950s, was published one year later. Most of the interviews were republished in *A Donald Honig Reader* (1988). The new edition, published by University of Nebraska Press, is a reprint of the first two volumes. Honig organized his work similarly to Ritter with very little introductory discussion, and lets the players tell their own story in their own words. Honig was less skilled as an interviewer than Ritter, and primarily focused on the playing of the game on the field. His ballplayers remember the big games, big plays, and the prominent personalities, but I found it less informative. Only here and there is there any discussion of semipro or college baseball, or life in the minors. There is virtually no information about class backgrounds, ethnicity, or education.

Since Honig's volumes were reprinted by a scholarly press, I would have liked to have seen something more than a straight reproduction. The volumes cry out for an introduction by a David Voigt or some other baseball historian. What is the meaning of all this material? Why do we need a new edition? Do these volumes tell us anything consequential about baseball history? I also would have liked some effort to update the material. It would not have entailed much time to have excised statements that are no longer historically accurate (such as calling for Arky Vaughn's election to the Hall of Fame, since he is now in it), and especially the dated information in the very brief biographical sketches that precede each biography with career records and notable achievements. For instance, Tommy Holmes should no longer be credited with having the national league record for hitting in 37 consecutive games, since Pete Rose has long surpassed it.

The two volumes consist of interviews with 18 and 19 players, respectively. There is no explanation for why these men were chosen, although

most of them were prominent players. They were overwhelmingly drawn from WASP and old immigrant backgrounds. Vic Raschi was the only player of new immigrant stock. There were just two African-Americans, Cool Papa Bell, from the Negro Leagues, and Monte Irvin, whose interview focused on his major league career. Twelve of 37 attended college. Parental data is available on only about 12, virtually all of whom were sons of blue-collar workers or farmers.

Honig produced a book aimed at a wide reading audience. It is mainly comprised of reminiscences and fond memories. As such, he succeeded in his goal because the interviews are generally entertaining to read. There are, for instance, some interesting anecdotes about players' pranks. The interviews have been deftly edited to appear as if they are one long seamless monologue, uninterrupted by questions. For historians, the key question to ask of the material is what do we get out of it? For baseball experts, probably not a whole lot. Rarely did I come across information I did not know, or that other baseball historians need to know. There is a lot we could learn about individual ambition, personality, and social background. There is very little mention about salaries and standard of living. We do get a lot of peer assessments, usually in glowing terms. The only truly introspective interview was by Bill Wakefield, one of the first bonus babies, who was a founder of the pension system. The index has limited value because only names are indexed, with the exception of world series games.

Still, if one is persistent, some insights can be gleaned. Honig's subjects included unsophisticated young players, and we see their problems trying to negotiate contracts with experienced baseball businessmen. Babe Herman offers good information on life on the road. Interviewees were not dissatisfied with their incomes, especially during the Depression. Players seem to have had considerable parental support. Some surprises were uncovered, such as star hurler Lefty Grove's comfort at overstaying his time in the minors because he could make more money than in the majors. On the other hand, during the Depression some minor leaguers had wages withheld.

Clyde Sukeforth has interesting personal observations on Jackie Robinson and the drafting of Roberto Clemente. Rip Sewell discussed the origins and history of his blooper pitch and Feller discussed his youth. Other players also discussed Feller, including Tommy Heinrich, who indicated the Yankees stole his signals, yet still could not hit him. Kirby Higbe's interview examined the "good old boys" of which he was a prime example. Other interesting tidbits include Ralph Kiner pointing out that in one season beginning on June 11 he hit 48 homers; Mickey Vernon indicated that Al Rosen of the Indians lost the triple crown by one point when he missed first base while running out an infield hit; and Monte Irvin has some fascinating points on the 1951 third playoff game, indicating the significance of catcher Roy Campanella having missed the game. Herb Score and Billy Goodman offer different views of the precocious pitcher's downfall after he was hit in the

face by a ball struck by Gil McDougal. The pitcher felt his arm had given out, but Goodman felt that Score's eyesight had been so badly damaged that he could not see bunted balls. Robin Roberts provided an interesting anecdote about intra-team job competition. His colleague, the veteran Schoolboy Rowe, discovered a flaw in Roberts' motion in which he would give away that he was throwing the curve beforehand. Rowe did not tell his teammate that, however, until the oldtimer was cut. Perhaps the most illuminating interview is that of Cool Papa Bell, who, I discovered, had started out as a pitcher. Bell reviewed life in the negro league, white audiences, barnstorming, and such achievements as hitting over .400 in the Mexican League at age 43. Yet these limited insights are too few to recommend Honig's books for classroom use. I have in the past used Ritter with success, and his volume is still unsurpassed.

There has recently been a mini-revival in the baseball interview book, inspired both by Ritter and Honig, and also the rise of the Society of American Baseball Researchers. The late Eugene Murdock, the noted Civil War historian and biographer of Ban Johnson, authored *Baseball Players and Their Games: Oral Histories of the Game, 1920-1940* (1991) and *Baseball Between the Wars: Memories of the Game by the Men who Played It* (1992). The first was an effort to integrate traditional and oral history. Murdock wrote biographies of 22 players based on a combination of his own research and their own oral testimony. The second was directly based on transcripts of interviews with nine players including Roger Peckinpaugh, Edd Roush, Wait Hoyt, and Riggs Stephenson. The text is divided into questions and answers in a very conversational style that could have used extensive editing. Murdock's works are primarily for the ardent fan, yet they are more historically oriented than Honig's and the most recent oral history publications. Rick Van Blair's *Dugout to Foxhole: Interviews with Baseball Players Whose Careers Were Affected by World War II*, which actually has very little about the war in the interviews, or Daniel Peary's recent *We Played the Game: 65 Players Remember Baseball's Greatest Era, 1947-1964*. Peary's huge work does not consist of self-contained interviews. He has edited his interviews into year-by-year chapters which try to cover every team. This is an ambitious approach, but I'm not certain how useful it is to the reader.

This work is aimed at sports buffs rather than scholars. There are few sociological insights, but there are some very illuminating interviews, particularly with pitcher Don Newcombe, the only African-American in the book, and African-Cuban Vic Powers.²

Northeastern Illinois University

Steven A. Riess

2. Eugene Murdock, *Baseball Players and Their Games: Oral Histories of the Game, 1920-1940* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991); idem, *Baseball Between the Wars: Memories of the Game by the Men Who Played It* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1992); Rick Van Blair, *Dugout to Foxhole: Interviews with baseball Players Whose Careers Were Affected by World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994); Daniel Peary, *We Played the Game: 65 Players Remember Baseball's Greatest Era, 1947-1964* (New York: Hyperion, 1994).