

## Book Reviews

Fountain, Charles. *Sportswriter: The Life and Times of Grantland Rice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. 327 pp. \$25.

“For when the One Great Scorer comes to mark against your name. He writes—not that you won or lost—but how you played the Game.” Does anyone really believe that today? One wonders. Did anyone take those words seriously when Grantland Rice wrote them seventy-some years ago? No doubt someone did. Did Grantland Rice? Of course he did. Should he have? Possibly. Should we today? One more than wonders.

One also wonders what Grantland Rice would have to say about the general state of sport in our current age of excess (when it comes to money and outrageous behavior, rather than simply greatness among the players of the games). Then again, one needn’t wonder too much. Given what sportswriter Rice had to say in virtually all of his 67,000,000-some professional words, it’s safe to say that he’d have been “agin” it. And given what Charles Fountain has to say about him in this first full biography of the first American sportswriter, it’s an even safer bet to say that he’d have been “agin” it.

In any event, it’s also quite safe to say that Grantland Rice was a lucky man. No doubt he was luckier than Red Smith, who surely would not object to being labelled the second American sportswriter. Smith was never quick to resort to superlatives, but he made an exception when it came to not just the “greatest talent,” but the “greatest gentleman,” and not just the “greatest gentleman,” but the “greatest man” he had even known. Grantland Rice could do that to people, even jaded fellow sportswriters who were not likely to find a colleague or a jock (but probably a cliché) worthy of their embrace. Rice could even do that to Red Smith, a gifted sportswriter whose prose never crept close to a cliché, but whose equally long and productive career crept well into the sporting Age of Excess.

Yes, Grantland Rice **was** a lucky man. He was in his prime during a different sort of “age of excess” (whether in reference to Babe Ruth’s home runs—or his waistline). And Rice had the great good fortune to die well just as the current Age of Excess was struggling to be born. Had he lived much longer one wonders whether he would have continued his love affair with sport—or joined Will Rogers in declaring that he had never met anyone (at least in the sporting fraternity) whom he didn’t like.

In Grantland Rice’s lineup there simply was no one to dislike. And in his untroubled consciousness there was certainly no need to conjure up a Golden Age of American sport. There was just sport. American and Olympian, professional and amateur, good and better and best.

To those who have come after Grantland Rice, it is tempting to think that there must have been a sporting Golden Age somewhere between the sporting aristocracy of the nineteenth century and sport under the watchful eye of television—meaning sport sometime during the heyday of Grantland Rice. Does Charles Fountain resist this temptation? Not entirely. Does this reviewer? Of course . . . not. In fact, it is more than tempting to think such ahistorical thoughts from the unhappy vantage point of the games that accompany the Game as it is currently played.

But are such tempting thoughts at all accurate? Did Rice, in fact, chronicle sport when sport was pure and innocent? Of course . . . not. Did the Black Sox care only about how the Game was played? Did a Knute Rockne or a Jack Dempsey? Did Babe Ruth? No.

Does that make the first American sportswriter out to be the last American innocent? No. There will always be more from whence he came. Besides, he was less an all-American innocent than a lover of all American sports (at a time when it was presumably a whole lot easier to love sport—or so one surmises from reading this biography of the essentially untumultuous life of Grantland Rice).

Biographer Fountain is not out to glorify either Rice or sport between the world wars. But the result is a biography that seeks to resurrect Rice's reputation for prose and poetry without doing any serious damage to his reputation or that of anyone he ever chronicled. This approach confirms not only Grantland Rice's status as the first American sportswriter, but also his standing as the founding father of the "gee whiz" school of sports journalism.

Fountain doesn't probe deeply into the reasons why Rice wrote as he wrote. He doesn't have to. Unlike Ring Lardner, who became his unlikely friend and neighbor, Grantland Rice was not a very complicated character. Nor was he an introspective one. A terminally pleasant man unburdened by a perpetually sunny disposition, he could no more brood than he could vent or stew. An unassuming man, his achievements, whether literary or athletic, provided him with plenty to crow about—had he been so inclined.

An intercollegiate athlete (baseball and football) at Vanderbilt (class of 1901), Rice was nearly as adept at playing almost any game (but especially golf as he moved into his middling years) as he was at writing about almost any game (but especially whatever happened to be on his plate at the moment). "Gee Whizzer" or no, Grantland Rice during his uninterrupted—and very long prime could write. That must be, shall we say, granted, even when his prose shaded—or even leaped—into the purple, and especially if his idea for a column seldom derived from the same source as Red Smith's

By all accounts (including Fountain's), Grantland Rice was a happily married man. But his first love was always sport. Not so for his friend and friendly rival, Red Smith, who carried on a love-hate relationship with what he often consigned to the "toy department" of life. Somewhat paradoxically,

Smith once compared writing a sports column to opening a vein and bleeding a little. Rice seldom, if ever, felt the need to do that. Instead he readily found other veins to mine and bled only the colors of his beloved alma mater.

But Charles Fountain reminds us that Grantland Rice on his off-days could still write—even if an occasional cliché was no more alien to him than the most remote bench warmer on the worst of teams. At the risk of engaging in his own version of “gee whizzing,” Charles Fountain has resurrected a figure alien to the world of modern sport and modern sports journalism. But questions remain: By helping to popularize sport did Rice help bridge the gap between his sporting world and ours? Therefore, just how large was the gap between those worlds? Would there have been room for a Grantland Rice in the age of, say, Howard Cosell? For that matter, where might Rice fit in this post-Cosell world of sport?

While we’re at it, to what extent did “gee whiz” sportswriting help create the myth of a sporting Golden Age in the first place? And has the demise of that journalistic school contributed, at least indirectly, to the current orgy of cynicism? Or does such a suggestion take too much away from the contributions of a seemingly endless list of modern-day culprits, including the late Howard Cosell?

Cosell and Rice. Two obvious opposites. A brash New York huckster and a quiet Nashville gentleman. One “never played the game,” and the other excelled at many of them. One was as arrogant as the other was not. One made enemies as effortlessly as the other stockpiled friends. But amid the “tumult and the shouting” the two did share something important: both at base were sports fans. That was always enough to save Grantland Rice. In the end it was not enough to save Howard Cosell. Two different men? Two different times?

Fountain has not attempted to answer any of these questions. But reading this biography inevitably provokes them, even if the author is content simply to revive an almost forlorn figure from our increasingly ancient sporting past. To be sure, Grantland Rice is someone well worth reviving—and, on occasion, still worth quoting. His life also provides an occasion for wondering about sporting ages past and present, even if his biographer isn’t tormented with wonder as to what his subject might have had to say to us today. And perhaps that’s just as well.

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