

Book Reviews

Inabinett, Mark. *Grantland Rice and His Heroes: The Sportswriter as Mythmaker in the 1920s*. Knoxville, Tenn.: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994. Pp. xi, 130. Notes, photographs, index. Cloth, \$28. Paper, \$14.

Mark Inabinett is most successful in capturing and writing admirably of Grantland Rice's enthusiasm for sport and athletes. His book is subtitled "The Sportswriter as Mythmaker in the 1920s." and he promises to examine that process as embedded in Rice's work. However, a reader, especially a sport or media historian, ultimately leaves the book feeling that Inabinett's real purpose in writing about Rice is, in an age of strikes, franchise switching, Tonya Harding, and heroes who change hair color and celebrity girlfriends on a weekly basis, to construct a melancholy ode to the lost enthusiasm of a past sporting era and the man who made the spirit of the time vault from his column. Of contemporary sportswriters, Inabinett observes: "Dazzled by an electronic coat of many colors, sportswriters have yielded their birthright and settled for the preciseness of statistics and the cleanliness of quotes" (p. 106). Today's sportswriters, he contends, ignore the enduring elements of sport that Rice glorified, and they have given up trying, or have forgotten how, to tell a good story. Well, maybe. But it can be said with certainty that few do it like Rice anymore.

Inabinett's work is the second book-length study of Grantland Rice to be published within a two-year period. Charles Fountain's *Sportswriter: The Life and Times of Grantland Rice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) is more biographical, covering Rice's entire life and career. Inabinett's book is more of an unabashed tribute to Rice, almost a fan's notes on a sportswriting legend.

Unlike Fountain, Inabinett focuses on Rice's role as a mythologizing hero-maker in the Golden Age of American sports in the 1920s. Inabinett postulates research questions that he never gets around to answering. He asks: What made the Golden Age golden? He wonders whether "the Golden Age was the product of skillful gilding by that era's sportswriters" (p. ix), and he attempts to answer those questions by examining Rice's sportswriting dealing with the heroes of the period: Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Bobby Jones, Bill Tilden, Red Grange, and Knute Rockne.

Two large problems with the book emerge rather quickly. First is Inabinett's choice to concentrate solely on Rice as if he were somehow representative of all sportswriters in all corners of the nation in the Jazz Age. That simply is not the case. Rice was clearly an influential and important figure in the development of American sports journalism, but in the 1920s he was working elbow-to-elbow at major sporting events with others of considerable talent and influence. Damon Runyon, Westbrook Pegler, Ring Lardner, Paul Gallico, and W.O. McGeehan, to

name just a few, were at work both praising and, in some cases, debunking the nation's mass-mediated sports heroes. While Rice is regarded as the founder and most famous practitioner of the "gee whiz" school of sportswriting, McGeehan, his editor for a period during the Twenties at the *New York Herald Tribune*, and Pegler are regarded as the founders of the curmudgeonly and, taking the long view of twentieth-century sports journalism, equally influential "aw nuts" school.

But Inabinett is interested in exploring how Rice's "skillful gilding" produced sports heroes. This is where a second major problem arises. Rather than analyzing if or how Rice's journalism produced mythic sporting figures, the author launches into a chapter-by-chapter anecdotal account of Rice and his relationships with each athlete or, in Rockne's case, coach. The problem is that Rice has done the job better in his autobiography, *The Tumult and the Shouting: My Life in Sports* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1954). Inabinett argues that Rice's friendship with these men helped humanize them for readers. Ironically, others, most notably Robert Lipsyte in *SportsWorld: An American Dreamland* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975) have made the opposite point—that it was the work of the debunkers such as McGeehan and Pegler that helped humanize sport's mythic figures.

Inabinett, who is managing editor of the *Washington Daily News* in Washington, North Carolina, studies the process of mythologizing athletes as if it occurred solely on the nation's sports pages and solely in Rice's column. Because of this, his study lacks the thickness of cultural description that anthropologist Clifford Geertz urges and that would seem inescapable in attempting to make the claims Inabinett makes for Rice. Chapter 2 deals with an assessment of "The Golden Age," addressing too briefly political, economic, technological, and journalistic developments during the decade that made it ripe for the growth of sport. This thinness of description is evident in the chapter on Dempsey in which the name Tex Rickard appears only once. Did Rice and other sportswriters make Dempsey a hero, or did Rickard, boxing's foremost promoter and the developer of Madison Square Garden, and Doc Kearns, Dempsey's manager, conspire to make sportswriters make Dempsey a hero? It is a huge and important question that Inabinett ignores.

Inabinett is on firmer ground in his treatment of Rice's place in fostering Rockne's popularity, citing in particular Rice's famous Four Horsemen story following the 1924 Notre Dame-Army game and his role in perpetuating the Gipp legend. It is a solid chapter; but, again, readers might be better served by looking at the same material in Rice's autobiography.

The same may be said of Inabinett's chapters on Bobby Jones and Bill Tilden, which offer little in the way of analysis. However, in the chapter on Jones, the author takes on Lipsyte's charge that Rice, or "Rice-ites," as Lipsyte labels them, "dehumanized the contests and made objects of the athletes." Inabinett points to Rice's emphasis on Jones's temper and his struggle to control it on the golf course as a humanizing factor in his writing. He may be right as far as it goes, but his analysis of Rice as mythmaker and of the charges levelled

against him as such does not go far enough.

In a concluding chapter summing up "Rice's Legacy," Inabinett writes: "The modern sportswriter who sees little but laughable purple prose in Rice's work should remember the debt owed to Rice" (p. 104). Therein lies the rub with this book: To what extent do modern sportswriters and sports fans, for that matter, owe Rice a debt of gratitude, and/or to what extent can the modern sports world lay blame on the "gee whiz" writings of Rice for at least some of the problems of commercialism, exploitation, and mindless hero worship that have ensued? Inabinett does not explore that question fully.

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