
WHITE, G. EDWARD. *Creating the National Pastime: Baseball Transforms Itself*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. Pp. vii, 368. Notes, illustrations, index. \$24.95 cb.

G. Edward White, University Professor and John B. Minor Professor of Law and History at the University of Virginia, has written a book worthy of the prodigious length of his professional title! An expert in American legal history and the author of eight books, including biographical studies of Earl Warren and Oliver Wendell Holmes, White journeys somewhat afield in this splendidly written, imaginatively organized interpretation of the growth of American baseball in the first half of the twentieth century.

A brief review can hardly do justice to this complex, carefully nuanced study. White, in essence, tries to answer what for baseball historians has become a kind of \$64,000 question: Why and how, in fact, did this particular sport become identified as America's national pastime? Basing his research on a careful reading of secondary and some primary sources, White generally downplays the traditional American Studies "image-myth-symbol" approach in favor of an economic model. In brief, he argues that from 1903 to 1953, baseball team owners tried to ensure financial stability in the baseball business through three major devices: the reserve clause, blacklisting, and territoriality. By assuring that players would by and large be tied to one team, and that teams would be bound to specific cities, rough equality of competition and civic pride in teams would be guaranteed. And this civic connection to teams with relatively equal chances of winning would thus secure profits and stability. While not consciously considering the cultural meanings of major league baseball (p. 23), owners, in essence, transformed the game from unregulated amateur play to a business with deeply resonant connections to specific urban locales.

In many ways, baseball owners were products of their time; they were like other corporate owners who wanted to control labor costs and cut down on damaging "free" competition. But unlike other businessmen, they were not subject to government regulation under antitrust legislation. They had successfully convinced the courts of the "peculiar" nature of baseball: it was more a sport and a sacrosanct American tradition than a business "an argument without merit, in White's view. Ironically, White argues, owners might well have believed their own rhetoric in ways that led to economic anomalies. For example, ownership is

long opposition to night games, radio broadcasts, air travel, and racial integration all economically feasible and potentially profitable can be explained partly by the possibility that owners believed baseball is idealized image of itself (p. 7) and resisted any kind of change in the traditional game.

Perhaps the most provocative element in White's case is his view of the laborers themselves—America's baseball players. He contends that, by and large, the workers accepted the owners' view of the game: "The individuals most severely disadvantaged by the laws of baseball, the players, showed very little dissatisfaction with a system...that essentially reduced them to a species of peonage" (p. 4).

Of course, modern players are a very different kettle of fish. The successful challenge to the reserve clause, along with the end of blacklisting and the demise of a rigid interpretation of territoriality (and subsequent franchise relocation and creation), have changed the game forever. Baseball is now just another American sport, competing, not always successfully, with other sports for civic attention. White concludes that in the next century, students of the game may well gravely announce that baseball was, rather than is, the national pastime (p. 330).

This brilliant analysis is not without flaws, however. More careful editing would have eliminated some repetitious diction, colloquialisms like "nowhere near" (p. 226), and misspellings like "Richard Vidmar" instead of "Vidmer" (p. 196). Moreover, although individual chapters on ballpark building, the Negro Leagues, radio, sportswriters, and ethnicity are evocative and beautifully crafted, they read more like individual essays than parts of a coherent whole.

More importantly, many scholars will find White's argument that players were relatively acquiescent, to be thin and poorly supported. Historian Robert Burk, for example, recently maintained that there was substantial player discontent during the early twentieth century. Indeed, most players wanted to gain "greater economic leverage.. [and] occupational control." They failed partly because of economic division among their ranks and a lack of "managerial expertise" (Robert F. Burk, *Never Just a Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920*, xiii, xiv). On this point, I find Burk's argument more persuasive than White's argument.

These minor problems aside, *Creating the National Pastime* is an important contribution to our history and understanding of a major American sport.

—ANTHONY O. EDMONDS
Ball State University