

History, Memory and Baseball's Original Sin: The Telling and Retelling of the Black Sox Scandal

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NATHAN, DANIEL. *Saying It's So: A Cultural History of the Black Sox Scandal*. Sport and Society Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Pp. viii +360. Notes, index, illustrated. \$39.95.

The subject of Daniel Nathan's new book is the American fascination with the Black Sox Scandal ever since the 1920s when it was front-page news. Interest remains strong in a notorious event about which so much remains a mystery.¹ This is especially true for the past twenty years, reflected by the many fictional and non-fiction books about it, a recent major motion picture, the failure of Joe Jackson to make the Hall of Fame as well as the need to place the Pete Rose situation in an historical framework. Fascination with Black Sox memorabilia is probably at an all time high, facilitated by "EbAY." Only recently, Jackson's bat, Black Betsy, was sold for \$577,610.² Nathan's book is not a history of the scandal itself but rather an examination of how and why the event itself has remained so prominent in our collective memories. He is concerned with how the event has been represented and remembered by journalists, historians, novelists, filmmakers, and baseball fans.

As the book jacket accurately indicates, it is a complex study of cultural values, memory, and the ways people make meaning. Nathan argues that what people have thought about and how they have depicted the scandal reveals their identity, values, and historical moment. One of the author's fundamental points is that the past and history are not the same thing because history is the past interpreted. He calls the scandal a relatively insignificant historical incident (p. 6), although I think it does rank as a major event in twentieth-century American social and cultural history.

The interest in history and memory is hardly new.³ Carl Becker in his presidential address to the American Historical Association declared that History is the memory of things said and done. More recently, noted world historian William H. McNeill pointed out that history is neither more nor less than the record of the memories that affect public behavior.⁴ Patrick Hutton points out that historians of memory are suspicious of the distortions of memory, and they are watchful of the transference of their own memories onto the histories that they would write, often repressed, or based on calculating power. The first focus by historians was on collective memory and national identity, Holocaust studies, and the linguistic turn, which in Hutton's terms, is an attack on traditional history that was unconscious of the hidden, tacit, often naive construction of its narrative on the basis of salient facts.⁵

This well-written book is divided into chronologically topical chapters. Nathan begins with the first draft of the story by metropolitan journalists, who he presumes reflect the values, beliefs, and needs of their audience. The original report in the daily press is of a labyrinthine story of deception, betrayal, and moral disorder (p. 11). They presented the scandal in a way that dovetailed with the core society's main values. Nathan examines the process of transforming an event into news which depending on the interest of the writer reflects a concern with issues like crime, anti-Semitism, class, and labor relations. The first narratives have had a big influence on how the event is retold and remembered. The main figure here is Hugh Fullerton, the noted and widely syndicated baseball writer, known for his prognostications and his expert reportage. Nathan also pays attention to such matters as headline sizes and language, particularly the widespread use of the adjective "black" in related stories. Journalists discussed the blackening of the game's reputation, its threat to contaminate and pollute society, and the need to clean up the game. The media often used Jewish stereotypes when discussing gamblers and baseball, frequently citing Arnold Rothstein as the source of baseball's tragedy and America's moral disorder. Nathan is on less firm grounds when he examines how representations of the Black Sox reflected conventional ideas about manhood in the 1920s. These fallen idols, frequently referred to as "boys," are presented with little sympathy or compassion as traitors, outlaws, and rats. By comparison, the clean Sox, most notably Eddie Collins are held up as virtuous role models of manhood.

In the next chapter, Nathan examines the scandal and American collective memories, focusing on how the scandal was remembered before the 1950s when it became an important subject of popular literature and history. He reflects on how those memories expressed the needs and desires of their propagators and illumined particular cultural moments. Nathan defines collective memory as a cultural construction that represents or explains the past. People and societies built up selective versions of the past that con-

formed to their own beliefs about the present.⁶ Commissioner Landis became a memory marker, a patriarch who protected and promoted a middle-class version of appropriate manliness. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) was another important marker. Published only five years after the event, it provided readers a contemporary framework for understanding Gatsby's amorality and duplicity. Fitzgerald added to the stereotyped caricature of the outsider (Jew) as evil manipulator and corrupter of the game and our heroes, resulting in our loss of innocence. Nathan also looked at attitudes that deviated from the norm, such as the eulogizing of Joe Jackson, especially in his home state of South Carolina.

A key chapter entitled "Novel as History, a Novel History," examines Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) and Eliot Asinof's *Eight Men Out* (1965). Nathan argues these works have lasting cultural value because they help maintain popular memories of the scandal when they were fading, treat the subject with unknown seriousness and complexity, and influenced every subsequent telling of the affair. Both authors were Jewish Americans who grew up in the Depression with an interest in outsiders and outcasts and were tied to their historic post-war moment through the Red Scare. Nathan asserts this period was one of uneasiness, conflict, and change, in which ideological struggle and social discontent were veiled by the appearance of consensus and consumerism. Both works "represent expressions of loss and regret, pleas for compassion and understanding" (p. 117).

Nathan argues *The Natural* imparts a mythic and indeterminate past that represents a morally bankrupt wasteland. Hobbs is superficial, lacks maturity and development. The novel promotes a yearning for virtue and moral growth. Hobbs is transformed from an arrogant person to one filled with shame and self-hatred, who seems to have learned his lessons in the end. Hence man is capable of redemption through suffering and atonement.⁷ Asinof also seeks to reclaim the villains, who were victims responding to bad treatment. He sympathetically tries to redeem their battered reputations while indicting the establishment as hypocrites. Asinof posits that moral judgment cannot be made without considering the social relations that fostered the event. Nathan does point out that the Asinof account is not a scholarly book and there is the problem of verifiability. Obviously, he was not privy to the players' conversations. Asinof presents what seems to be a definitive narrative, yet we know the truth is very murky.

Nathan examines how professional historians have dealt with the scandal, focusing on how contemporary events shaped their narratives. Nathan argues that David Voigt's brief account of the scandal in *American Baseball: From the Commissioner to Continental Expansion* (1970) places it in the context of the immediate post-war era full of uncertainty with race riots, Bolshevism, the Red Scare, Prohibition, and labor unrest. The era was already filled with rumors and acts of chicanery. Hence the scandal was hardly an aberration. The narrative is marred by a few minor factual errors, which does not surprise Nathan since "the story is [so] convoluted that even a sure-handed scholar like Voigt will occasionally (and probably inevitably) misstate a few facts" (p. 125). Nathan argues that Voigt's reapportionment of much of the blame challenged authority in ways common to activists and reformers of the 1960s, though he was of an older generation. He put much of the responsibility on Comiskey and the baseball establishment who abused their work force.

Like a student of the late 1960s, though he is older, Voigt puts a lot of his focus on marginal people who he sees as both victim and villain.

Harold Seymour in *Baseball: The Golden Age* (1970) devotes a large section (sixty-five pages) to the scandals, looking at the events with a very skeptical position. He points out the public should not have been shocked given the endemic gambling in baseball, but people saw baseball's integrity as a certitude. He felt the event was long in coming given the gambling and possible corruption in the sport since the turn of the century. He did some original research, including interviews with men like Joe Jackson. However, he does not explicitly document his sources. Nathan wonders about overuse of the Grabiner diaries through the eyes of the less-than-reliable author/raconteur Bill Veeck.⁸ Seymour places the Big Fix in the context of baseball history and internal politics but less so in the broader context of American social history. He did an excellent job telling the story, analyzing the event and its causes, and challenged some standard perspectives. His sympathy was with the players, but Seymour could not accept their cheating. He felt that Landis' punishment was too severe and dismisses the commissioner as the savior of baseball.

Nathan also looks critically at Donald Gropman's *Say It Ain't So, Joe!* (1979), an apologetic and forgiving biography of Jackson. Gropman sees Jackson as a scapegoat, an innocent, and a dupe denied justice by Commissioner Landis. Nathan read the revised edition (1992) of the book in which Gropman added a lot of documentation to show Jackson's mistreatment by the baseball establishment but does not comment on that (p. 255n94). Gropman made some interesting points about the relationship of Alfred Austrian, Comiskey's attorney, to the players. Austrian counseled Jackson and Cicotte to sign prepared confessions for the grand jury without reading them and did not advise them about seeking immunity.⁹

Greed and excess dominated the popular culture of Reagan's America, not the economic problems created by the loss of manufacturing jobs or the appearance of widespread corruption in the government and the private sector. The United States in the 1980s was sports crazy, and star athletes were celebrities, heroes, and very rich. In the midst of all this, Nathan found novelists harkening back to the Black Sox. He stated that novels frequently wield considerable power in shaping popular understanding of the past and, I would add, especially when turned into major motion pictures. He examines W.P. Kinsella's novel *Shoeless Joe* (1982), which became the movie *Fields of Dreams* (1989). The novel's Joe Jackson is articulate and heroic, who was unjustly punished for his sins. In Kinsella's paradise, players are resurrected, and Jackson is freed of his sin. Critics had indicated that Kinsella uses the Black Sox to celebrate dreams, aspirations, and respect for the land and to attack corporate coldness to humanity. Nathan argues Kinsella's conception of baseball, like George Will and Bartlett Giamatti, radiates conservative romanticism (p. 157), standing for yearnings for a pristine and unattainable past.¹⁰ John Sayles's outstanding film *Eight Men Out* presents the players as pawns of circumstance (linked to their status as exploited workers), gullibility, inertia, greed, and lack of courage. He is very sympathetic to them and sees them as pawns of the baseball establishment, unscrupulous gamblers, and their own financial problems, yet portrays them with all their warts.

In the end, Nathan argues the story endures because of the social utility of the story and the indeterminacy of the event. It is a story about a few immoral, not too bright,

greedy men who betray their teammates, fans, and bosses because of the corrupting influences of foreign elements. This fable of lost innocence was a masculine cautionary tale, a historical reference point for contemporary crises, and a narrative that analyzes the past and the present. The story tells of the fragility of heroes, offers interpreters changing conceptions of middle-class manhood, and demonstrates the vagaries of historical knowledge. The narratives he analyzes exemplify that cultural meaning is not fixed. Meanings are alterable to reflect new social realities, needs, and desires. Yet, even if causes and facts are uncertain, there are limits to how far one can reshape the narrative that still signified betrayal, corruption, and disillusionment.

Nathan's perspective differs from most studies of memory. He is less concerned with the memory of contemporaries recounting their take on the Black Sox than on how subsequent generations of baseball fans, novelists, and historians recreate (or re-remember) the lore and symbolic significances that has been passed down to them over time. The Black Sox Scandal was one of those special events that is, over time, regularly reexamined in the light of changing frames of reference. While historians do this all the time, it takes a rare incident to similarly engage other people. Typically memories in museums, reenactments, or public commemorations are drawn up to reflect myths that reinforce public beliefs rather than realities. On the other hand, historians remain staunchly committed to getting the story straight, even if it does not make for a socially satisfying memory. This is clearly an area where sports scholars have a role to play.¹¹

This is well-written cultural history in the finest tradition of American Studies and merited its recognition by NASSS as the finest book on sport published in 2003. I strongly recommend the book, particularly for classes in historiography and historical method for its examination of the ways in which memory and meaning are contested and revised. Nathans main contribution to historical scholarship is his bringing together history and (traditional) American Studies with a slight postmodern twist.



¹On the historical literature on the Black Sox Scandal, see Daniel E. Ginsburg, *The Fix is In: A History of Baseball Gambling and Game Fixing Scandals* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1995), 100-162; Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era*, rev. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 92-96; David Q. Voigt, *America Through Baseball* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), 65-76; Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); 274-339; David Q. Voigt, *American Baseball: From the Commissioner System to Continental Expansion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 124-133; Victor Luhrs, *The Great Baseball Mystery:—The 1919 World Series* (New Brunswick, N.J.: A.S. Barnes, 1966); Eliot Asinof, *Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 Scandal* (New York: Henry Holt, 1965).

²*New York Times*, 8 August 2001, sec. D, p. 3.

³In 1989, scholarly interest in memory and history was marked with the publication of the journal *History & Memory* and of a special issue of the *Journal of American History*. See David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1989): 1117-1129, and several other essays, reprinted in David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). For a recent overview, see Patrick Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," *History Teacher* 33 (2000): 533-548. Current interest in the subject is reflected by the program of the 2004 meeting of the Organization of American Historians that for the first time will host a special series on history and memory. The most recent books on this popular genre include David Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002);

David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2002); Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time, and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2000); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Elizabeth R. Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity, Memory, and History in Antebellum Free Communities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). Important essays include Amy Adamczyk, "On Thanksgiving and Collective Memory: Constructing the American Tradition," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 15 (2002): 343-365; Robert J. McMahon, "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society 1975-2001," *Diplomatic History* 26 (2002): 159-184; Jenea Tallentire, "Strategies of Memory: History, Social Memory and the Community," *Histoire Sociale* 34 (2001): 197-212; Michael G. Kenny, "A Place for Memory: The Interface between Individual and Collective History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (1999): 420-437; Casey N. Blake, "The Usable Past, the Comfortable Past, and the Civic Past: Memory in Contemporary America," *Cultural Anthropology* 14 (1999): 423-435; John Bodner, "Generational Memory in an American Town," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 26 (1996): 619-637; Earl Lewis, "Connecting Memory, Self and the Power of Place in African American Urban History," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (1995): 347-371; and Billie Melman, "Gender History and Memory: The Invention of Women's Past in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *History & Memory* 5 (1993): 5-41.

⁴Carl L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1935), 235; William H. McNeill, "How History Helps Us Understand Current Affairs," in *Historical Literacy*, ed. Paul Gagnon (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 157, as cited in Zachary Osofsky, "American History in American Classrooms," *History Matters!* 16 (2003): 7.

⁵Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," 535. On nationalism, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: The Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). On Holocaust studies, see Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); idem, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); idem, *When Memory Comes* (New York: Noonday Press, 1991); Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Henry Russo, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991). On the linguistic turn, see Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁶See also Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History*; and Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993).

⁷For critical analyses of *The Natural* see, e.g., Earl R. Wasserman, "The Natural: Malamud's World Ceres," *Centennial Review* 9 (1965): 438-460; Frederick W. Turner, "Myth Inside and Out: Malamud's *The Natural*," *Novel* 1 (1968): 133-139; and Cordelia Candelaria, *Seeking the Perfect Game: Baseball in American Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989), 63-74. On the historicism of the novel, see Eric Solomon, "Jews, Baseball and the American Novel," *Arête: The Journal of Sport Literature* 2 (1984): 43-66; and Harley Henry, "Them Dodgers Is My Gallant Knights: Fiction as History in *The Natural* (1952)," *Journal of Sport History* 19 (1992): 110-129.

⁸Veck's tendency to inflate his own personal record has been pointed out in D.M. Jordan, L.R. Gerlach, and J.P. Rossi, "A Baseball Myth Exploded: Bill Veck and the 1943 Sale of the Phillies," *National Pastime* 18 (1998): 3-13.

⁹Donald Gropman, *Say It Ain't So*, rev. ed. (New York: Citadel Press, 1992).

¹⁰For criticisms of Kinsella, see August J. Fry, "The Return of Joseph Jefferson Jackson: A Study in

American Myth," in Robert Druce, ed., *A Center of Excellence: Essays Presented to Seymour Betsky* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 89-102; C. Kenneth Pellow, "Shoeless Joe in Film and Fiction," *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature* 9 (1991): 17-24; and Richard Alan Schwartz, "Postmodernist Baseball," *Modern Fiction Studies* 53 (1987): 135-149.

¹¹On memory and authenticity, see David Lowenthal, "The Timeless Past: Some Anglo-American Historical Preconceptions," *Journal of American History* 75 (1999): 1263-1280. There have been just a few essays on sporting subjects dealing specifically with history and memory. See R. McMahon, "Remembering the Black and Gold: African-Americans, Sport Memory and the University of Iowa," *Sport, Culture, Society* 4 (2001): 63-98; M. Taylor, "Football, History and Memory: The Heroes of Manchester United," *Football Studies* 3 (2000): 24-41; D. MacKinnon, "Myth, Memory, and the Kitchener-Waterloo Dutchmen in Canadian International Hockey," *Sport History Review* 31 (2000): 1-27; Arnd Krüger and A. Sanders, "Jewish Sports in the Netherlands and the Problems of Selective Memory," *Journal of Sport History* 26 (1999): 271-286; Ron Briley, "America, Baseball and Historical Memory in 1956: The Way We Never Were," *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Social Policy Perspectives* 8 (1999): 2-17; Murray G. Phillips, "Sports History, History and Social Memory: (Re)presenting Swimming in Australia," *Sporting Traditions* 15 (1998): 93-102; Stephen Hardy, "Memory, Performance, and History: The Making of American Ice Hockey at St. Paul's School, 1860-1915," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 14 (1997): 97-115; Steven R. Fox, *Big Leagues: Professional Baseball, Football, and Basketball in National Memory* (New York: Morrow, 1994); Terry Todd and S. Maxcy, "Muscles, Memory and George Hackenschmidt," *Iron Game History* 2 (1992): 10-15; and Lowell D. Blaisdell, "Legends as an Expression of Baseball Memory," *Journal of Sport History* 19 (1992): 227-243.