

The After-Image of Ebbets Field and the Shape of Baseball History

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This paper examines the ways in which the discipline of baseball history has defined its subject. To do this, we must note that a very high percentage of baseball historians grew up in Brooklyn and had a very personal, emotional involvement with the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1940s and 1950s. Because of their unique experience, they came to regard baseball as worthy of serious academic consideration, moreso than have others from elsewhere: thus their disproportionate share of the field of baseball history. As a result, a large part of

the Dodger myth has come to influence the field as a whole, as it has been incorporated into the work of these historians.

This “Brooklynization” of baseball studies begins with Harold Seymour, a pioneer in the field of baseball history and a former batboy for the Brooklyn Dodgers. From his early work on, he examined baseball’s “loss of character as a sport” as it became a professional game. His concerns were reflected and magnified by other Brooklyn-raised writers, notably Roger Kahn, whose *Boys of Summer* brought to the forefront the Dodger Fan’s pervasive and profound sense of loss, Melvin Adelman, Jules Tygiel, Ted Vincent, and Peter Levine. Others such as Harvey Frommer, Stanley Cohen, and Peter Golenbock have added weight to the Brooklyn Dodger myth and its influence on baseball history.

The common concerns of these historians are not surprising, in that they reflect their memories of the Dodgers: from the second-class, underdog status of “the Bums,” to their perennial also-ran teams of the 1940s and early 1950s (“Wait ‘til next year!”), to the impact of Jackie Robinson and integration, to their eventual triumph in the 1955 World Series, and then the ultimate denouement--the team’s abandonment of Brooklyn for sunnier, more profitable Los Angeles. Because of these experiences, these baseball scholars often focus on such issues as: the bond between team and community; the eventual commercialization of baseball and its resulting loss of purity; the democratic, egalitarian spirit of baseball, which allows all to be equal on the field or in the stands; the generational nature of the game, which allows ideals and values to be passed on from father to son (or manager to player); the mediation and representation of ethnic identity in baseball; and, of course, nostalgia and memory.

While these issues may be important, that they are cast in the image of the Brooklyn Dodger/Ebbets Field experience tends to limit the range of inquiry of baseball studies. If all writing possesses an autobiographical element, one can argue that these writers are working out issues that have been with them since the Dodgers left Brooklyn. Undoubtedly the loss they felt when one of the defining and unifying experiences of their lives was taken away drove home the importance of baseball’s relationship to culture; nonetheless, theirs is not a universal experience. With any subject with which one has direct emotional experience, there is always the danger that one’s memory will prove distracting. With baseball history a lapse into nostalgia or even self-pity is a possibility. Brooklynized baseball histories have set the parameters of the field; they should provide a bridge to wider-ranging baseball studies.