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Henry W. Thomas. *Walter Johnson: Baseball's Big Train.* Lincoln, Neb.: Bison Books, 1998. xiv + 458 pp. $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-9433-2.

Reviewed by Jon Enriquez (Georgetown University)
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The Gentleman Pitcher

Most sports biographies are for fans, because fans are most interested in the facts described in biographies. Scholars, however, look for something more. We crave insights into the motives and actions of a unique personality, or the sporting culture, or the social fabric of the nation, or the spirit of the age. The distinguished baseball historian Charles Alexander wrote a fine biography of Ty Cobb that painted a vivid portrait of Cobb and attempted to unlock the mysteries surrounding the enigmatic legend. By contrast, Alexander's biography of Rogers Hornsby is disappointing because Alexander fails to provide much more than the fan-biography grist of what-did-he-hit-in-1923. I suspect that the problem lies not with Alexander's shortcomings so much as with the possibility that there's nothing particularly interesting to learn or to say about the great infielder. In *Walter Johnson: Baseball's Big Train*, Henry Thomas successfully provides a well-rounded look at the life and personality of the Washington Senators pitcher, and suggests much about the place of baseball and baseball players in American culture in the 1910s and 1920s.

Johnson's place among the greatest pitchers of all time is unquestioned. He won 417 games, second only to Cy Young on the all-time list. In 1921, he broke Young's career strikeout total of 2799, and retired in 1927 with a total of 3508 strikeouts. Johnson held that record for more than sixty years, until Steve Carlton, Gaylord Perry, and Nolan Ryan all passed him in 1983; Tom Seaver and Don Sutton passed Johnson in 1985 and 1986 respectively. He still holds the record for most career shutouts with 110. And, as Thomas recounts in an appendix, there are dozens of ballplayers, sportswriters, fans, and historians who believe that Johnson was the greatest pitcher ever.

But Johnson was more than a great baseball player. His personal traits marked him as one of the most admired athletes of his day. The legendary Bill James once wrote, "To those of us growing up in the Midwest [in the 1950s and 1960s], Walter Johnson was exactly what [Christy Mathewson] was to Easterners. He was not only a legendary pitcher, but the incarnation of the athletic virtues of decency, charm, and style." Thomas provides a fine portrait of Johnson the man, skillfully weaving Johnson's personal life into his professional career. He gives ample evidence of Johnson's generosity, humility, and decency. He supplements this picture with a recounting of how Johnson was described in newspapers and magazines of the day. It is easy to understand why fans, players, and sportswriters alike had a high regard for Johnson.

One of the most memorable discussions in the book concerns the friendship between Johnson and Ty Cobb. Cobb was widely disliked for his arrogance, violent temper, and rough playing style. Yet Johnson and Cobb treated each other with respect and even affection. Thomas notes that Cobb was incapable of hitting Johnson's pitching until he realized that Johnson was mortally afraid of hitting a batter. Thereafter, Cobb crowded the plate and forced Johnson to pitch to Cobb's strength. Cobb's success against Johnson must have made it easier for the two great players to get along, but it is Johnson's sterling nature that clearly lies at the heart of their friendship. I was left with the thought that if Walter Johnson counted Ty Cobb as a friend, then perhaps Cobb wasn't so terrible after all.

Thomas's development of Johnson's noble character suggests that his personal traits played a critical role in his place in baseball lore. Especially in the early days of this century, athletes were often regarded as unsavory characters lacking one or more of the virtues of sobriety, discipline, hard work, kindness, humility, intelligence, and civility. Ty Cobb and John McGraw were perhaps the most famous baseball figures between 1900 and 1920, and both had several black marks on their characters. Even Babe Ruth, who must be accounted the most beloved athlete in American history, lacked some of these

virtues. Baseball players, it seemed, could not be both good athletes and good men. Christy Mathewson was exalted as an exemplary figure precisely because he succeeded in both areas. Mathewson was a contemporary of the fictional hero Frank Merriwell, the Yale athlete who triumphed over long odds through hard work and fair play. Mathewson seemed to be Merriwell incarnate, right down to the collegiate background. Much was made by sportswriters of Mathewson's college education, a rare experience among professional athletes. Johnson, whose career began as Mathewson's career was ending, inherited Mathewson's mantle as the avatar of good sportsmanship and clean living.

Unfortunately, these insights are only suggested by Thomas's work. Thomas contents himself with depicting the popular understanding of Johnson, and does not examine the larger context or significance of that perception. To be sure, this does not detract from the strength of the work, but it makes it rather less useful for scholars and teachers seeking course texts.

The major strength of this book is Thomas' impressive research. The author had an enviable resource base. He is the son of Walter Johnson's eldest daughter, and Thomas had ready access to the family letters and voluminous scrapbooks. Thomas built well on this invaluable head start, traveling to libraries and historical societies in Kansas, California, and Idaho, where Johnson grew up, in addition to using the many resources available in the Washington, DC, area where Johnson pitched and lived after retiring from baseball. He interviewed three of Johnson's children and renowned sportswriters Sam Lacy and Shirley Povich. He cross-checked reminisces by and about Johnson against contemporary newspaper accounts and other sources. This extensive research allows Thomas to provide a detailed look not only at Johnson's playing career, which is to be expected, but also less well known aspects of Johnson's life: his formative years, his semi-pro pitching career in California and Idaho, and his post-retirement activities, including his political career in rural Maryland.

Another significant strength is Thomas's prose style. He integrates his research into a smoothly flowing narrative. His spare, elegant writing is a pleasure to read.

There is one regrettable side effect of Thomas's fine narration. Thomas seamlessly resolves many inconsistent and conflicting accounts of Johnson's career. Unfortunately, Thomas invariably confines discussions of these inconsistencies to his notes. The reader is thus often unaware that such conflicts even exist. In a competing (and distinctly inferior) biography, *Walter Johnson: A Life*, Jack Kavanagh seems to devote his narrative exclusively to settling such conflicts in full view of the reader. Thomas's work is much easier to read, in no small part because of his flowing narrative, but the controversies in Johnson lore deserve a somewhat higher profile. Indeed, these controversies illustrate the creation of sports legend and myth, as well as the unique role assigned to Johnson. A fuller treatment of these errors would have enhanced the discussion of Johnson's place in baseball legend.

There are only a handful of sports figures whose lives, careers, and social impact merit a book-length study that is of more than particular interest; Ruth, Robinson, and Louis have been the subjects of excellent books, while Ali, Thorpe, and Richard deserve to be. Walter Johnson does not quite belong to that exalted circle, nor is this book as significant a study as, for instance, Jules Tygiel's *Baseball's Great Experiment*. However, Henry Thomas has produced a first-rate biography of Johnson, and scholars of sport in this period will find much useful material in the book.

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