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John P. Rossi. *The National Game: Baseball and American Culture*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2000. ix + 218 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-287-4.

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John Rossi begins his brief preface to *The National Game* by recalling a memorable confrontation fifty years ago with a local librarian. When asked about books on baseball history, she glared before responding “I know of none,” pausing before adding, “You should be reading something more worthwhile” (p. vii).

The librarian might be forgiven if she were referring to the sorry state of Philadelphia’s two franchises. With the exception of the Whiz Kids of 1950, the Phillies and Athletics of that period regularly lent new and agonizing meaning to the word futility, even for diehard fans. Having lived through that period myself, I know that some baseball history might well be forgotten.

Clearly this librarian was no sympathetic fan. However, as Rossi makes plain, it was equally clear that serious study of baseball history had been sadly neglected. The last fifty years have seen an outpouring of work in this area that shows no sign of letting up; while reading this book I was sent advertisements for three other newly published histories, each with its own approach and goals. The modest announced goal for this volume “is to provide an overview of the connections between professional baseball and America’s history over the last 175 years” (p. ix).

Admittedly, an overview of 175 years of baseball history is about all a writer could supply in 218 pages. Nevertheless, Rossi has produced an interesting and highly readable work, a book that is both objective and unsentimental. If it has few surprises, *The National Game* does provide many of the connections promised. A chronological approach keeps American history in focus even while baseball receives the greatest attention. Economic depressions, wars, and labor movements are clearly and succinctly related to the game, its owners, players and

fans. For example, Rossi writes:

World War I was something new and different for baseball’s buccaneer businessmen. The emotional patriotism, hatred of “the Hun,” and denunciation of slackers caught them off guard. The drilling of baseball players, the flying of the American flag, and donations to the Red Cross would not be enough to save major league baseball if the war dragged on for long. Unlike World War II, where a sympathetic President Roosevelt saw a real morale value in continuing baseball for the war’s duration, the Wilson administration was led by humorless zealots (p. 93).

Later, in discussing World War II, Rossi mentions that, “Latin players, because they were draft-exempt, found themselves in demand during the war” (p. 143).

The author is equally good at describing baseball’s shortsightedness and initial reluctance when confronted by innovation, the best example perhaps being their fears about radio and television broadcasts of games. And he traces rises and falls in attendance to events beyond waxing and waning interest in baseball itself.

Chapter titles tell much of the story, from the first, *Origins of the Game*, to *Baseball as Big Business, 1876-1891*, *The Wars of Baseball, 1909-1918*, and on up to the present. In the highly critical second-to-last chapter, *Best of Times, Worst of Times, 1978-1994*, Rossi depicts an America that “was adrift in the mid-1970s,” and sees that baseball had its own crisis of confidence. “The years from 1978 to 1994 saw power and influence in baseball pass from the owners, who had run the game from its origin, to the players” (p.192). He then marshals facts to justify his view: “The average salary of a baseball player rose from \$121,000 in 1979 to more than \$1.7 million by 1992–

as recently as 1967 it had been just \$19,000” (p.193).

It is no surprise to reflect on *The National Game* and see that, from first to last major league baseball and money are inseparable. There is considerable discussion throughout of attempts to create players’ unions and owners’ attempts to crush them. The last page of his book warns readers of the ongoing problems of revenue sharing between teams and profit sharing between owners and players. With all the great stars, memorable games, and moves towards inclusion, Rossi suggests it’s all about economics and always has been. And who would argue the point?

One could argue that this book should have devoted more space to the reasons behind the segregation of baseball or the rise of the Negro leagues, among other issues. However, there is only so much one can fit in any brief overview, and Professor Rossi’s Note on Sources is a valuable tool for a reader wishing to delve further into the subject. *The National Game* is a compact volume that will inform and entertain most students of baseball. Ideally, however, I suspect this volume was intended for the modern equivalent of the interested and disappointed youngster Rossi was fifty years ago. If that imperious librarian’s descendents are asked about baseball history, I hope they have copies of *The National Game* ready to lend.

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