

John M. Carroll. *Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. ix + 265 pp. \$26.97 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02384-2.

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## Red Grange and the Rise of Sports Iconography

### Red Grange and the Rise of Sports Iconography

F. Scott Fitzgerald always regretted being unable to play college football when he was an undergraduate at Princeton. On 21 January 1928 the *Saturday Evening Post* published Fitzgerald's short story, "The Bowl." "The Bowl" was Fitzgerald's only published short story with football as its central theme, although some of his stories had football as a backdrop of sorts. In "The Bowl," Dolly Harlan, a Princeton undergraduate, is one of the stars of the Princeton eleven. Nonetheless, despite his status on a campus swept up in the wave of college football that was sweeping the nation in the 1920s, Harlan is remarkably ambivalent about the game and its place in his life. He fears catching punts in the Yale Bowl, the stadium that gives the story its title. His new girlfriend hates the game, as her brother had died in a college game. Yet after he intentionally breaks his ankle to get him out of his senior season, he finds that he misses the game profoundly. He misses the adulation, the rush, the sense of belonging on a team. And so he decides to play for one last time on a gimp ankle.[1]

As with most all of Fitzgerald's Jazz Age work, "The Bowl" evokes the Roaring Twenties—the glamorous but somewhat vacuous lives and obsessions of the Ivy League elite; the tribulations of love and loss and longing; the themes that captured the attention of the circles of society in which Fitzgerald traveled and aspired. "The Bowl," in sum, is about more than college football, although college football is a central theme in the story. It is clear,

however, that Fitzgerald understood the prominence of college football in the 1920s, of the romance the game inspired, and of the status that it held not only on campuses across the country but amongst the American public as well.

The 1920s were a Golden Age of Sport. Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Bill Tilden and Bobby Jones captured the American imagination in ways that athletes had never done before in American society. However, perhaps no athlete was more responsible for the growth in popularity and legitimacy of his sport than was Harold "Red" Grange, the Galloping Ghost, the Wheaton Iceman. On one glorious afternoon in October 1924, Reed Grange transformed the game of college football with a showing that ranks among the greatest one-day performances in sporting history, perhaps alongside only Jesse Owens' world record binge in Ann Arbor on May 25, 1935.[2] In a span of 12 minutes, Grange scored four touchdowns against the University of Michigan. For the game, Grange scored five touchdowns, passed for another, gained 402 yards on the ground and completed six passes for another 64 yards. The game came on Illinois' Homecoming (a tradition that the University of Illinois originated) before tens of thousands of fans (this would be one of those sporting events, like Bobby Thompson's Shot Heard Round the World, that thousands more people would claim to have witnessed than actually attended the game).

John M. Carroll, Regents' Professor of History at

Lamar University, begins the main body of his wonderful book *Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football* with a retelling of Grange's exploits against Michigan on October 18, 1924. In the course of this telling of lore familiar to most sports fans, Carroll debunks myths that have built up around Grange and his performance. That is one of the valuable contributions of this book—Carroll clearly admires his subject. At the same time, he is disinclined to engage in historiography, and he is unwilling to accept as fact popular myths. Among these myths is the very idea that Grange single-handedly was responsible for the rise of the popularity of American football. Carroll is more sophisticated in his arguments. He does not attempt the fruitless task of drawing a causal link between the booming success of college football in the 1920s and after with Red Grange's career. Instead, he shows how Grange was part of, and in turn helped fuel, the phenomenon of football's rise in the first half of the century.

Carroll covers the life and especially the football career of Red Grange effectively and readably. He reveals how Grange's humble upbringing in Wheaton, Illinois, which at the turn of the century was on the way to becoming a part of suburban Chicago, but which at the same time was still rural in outlook and lifestyle. Grange's father was a police officer. Red, meanwhile, spent his summers delivering heavy blocks of ice, something he continued to do even after achieving fame as a college football star for Illinois. Carroll attributes this background to Grange's strong body, but also to the humility that characterized most of Grange's life, particularly his years after he retired from playing and later coaching the game.

Oddly, Grange, who helped to popularize the college game and to make it a national pastime, also was caught up in some of the controversies that would grow to characterize the sport in the decades to come. In particular, Grange caused a stir when after his senior season at Illinois he left school early to sign with the professional leagues. For the modern observer of college and professional sports some of the controversies will sound familiar—the concern over athletes leaving college early, the idea that athletes are in college less to get an education than to bring glory to the gridiron (or basketball) squad, the worry that sports are overemphasized in American life generally. Others will seem anachronistic—for example the idea that the professional game was somehow inferior to the college version. Many observers in 1925 and 1926 believed that Grange would only tarnish his image by entering the paid ranks.

Furthermore, for those readers accustomed to today's pro game, or even those who are aware of the relatively established nature of baseball in the 1920s, it might come as something of a surprise just how amateurish the pro game of Grange's early years was. In fact, central to Grange's role in popularizing the professional game were the tours on which he embarked after the NFL season ended in 1925 and the American Football League ended in 1926. After those seasons, Grange embarked on barnstorming tours that would astonish today's fan. The team, the composition of which often changed, traveled around various parts of the country playing local semiprofessional teams, makeshift pro teams, and college all-star squads that sometimes attracted throngs of fans. The pace was absurd, the games were often shoddy at best, and Grange had to deal with a whole range of pressures on and off the field.

Carroll explores Grange's relationship with the seemingly ubiquitous Charles C. Pyle, the forerunner to today's superagent. Part charlatan, part genius, part showman, Pyle served to steer Grange's career. He helped Grange into a surprisingly successful career in movies, he arranged the breakneck barnstorming tours, he pushed Grange into forming the ill-fated A.F.L. and he generally served as both Svengali and advisor to Grange's career. Pyle is one of the most vibrant characters in Carroll's book. However, Red Grange is always front and center. Carroll makes clear that Grange was not the most dynamic personality, and that we would not learn a great deal about him through a psychohistorical approach. This leaves Carroll free to do what he does best—to explore Grange's career and times and to reveal how Red Grange helped to fuel the tremendous successes both college and professional football would experience in the years of and long after Grange's playing days were over. Even if Grange does not deserve the sole responsibility for the rise of American football, he was central to it. Furthermore, Grange's continuing status as a hero and icon for millions of fans serves as a testament to his place in the early years of American football. Last year when every magazine and sports show gave us its list of the top athletes of the century, Grange was on every list, and was near the top of all of the football teams of the century.

It is an odd fact of American sports historiography that football is virtually overlooked, at least when placed in comparison to the extensive and often romantic literature surrounding baseball. This is still the case despite the fact that by many standards, football is stupendously popular, as much and in many ways more so than baseball. There is thus lots of space remaining on the shelf for

solid scholarly books on football and other sports, especially when the book is as readable and enjoyable as this one. John Carroll's *Red Grange and the Rise of American Football* deserves a place on the reading lists of historians and fans alike.

Notes:

[1]. See Matthew J. Bruccoli, *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989) pp. 390-411.

[2]. For the most worthwhile work on Jesse Owens see William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life*. (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

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