

# *Baseball, The American Epic*

KEN BURNS

**I**N 1909 a man named Charles Hercules Ebbets began secretly buying up adjacent parcels of land in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn including the site of a garbage dump called Pigtown because of the pigs that once ate their fill there and the stench that still filled the air. He hoped eventually to build a permanent home for the lackluster baseball team he had once worked for and now owned. The team was called the Trolley Dodgers, or just the Dodgers, after the way their devoted fans negotiated Brooklyn's busy streets. In 1912 construction began. By the time it was completed, Pigtown had been transformed into Ebbets Field, baseball's newest shrine, where some of the game's greatest drama would take place.

In the years to come, Dodger fans would see more bad times than good but hardly care, listen to the Southern cadences of a pioneer broadcaster, and witness first hand baseball's finest moment, when a black man wearing the number 42 trotted out to first base. In 1955, after more than four decades of frustration, Brooklyn would finally win a World Championship only to know just two years later the ultimate heartbreak as their team moved to a new city 3,000 miles away leaving an empty shell in Flatbush that

This lecture was given at Worcester on October 19, 1994, to inaugurate the American Antiquarian Society's new series of AAS-Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Lectures on American History. The lecture was repeated at the Chicago Historical Society and at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

---

KEN BURNS'S most recent documentary film was *Baseball*, his ninth in a series that has appeared on public television including *Brooklyn Bridge*, *The Statue of Liberty*, *Huey Long*, and *The Civil War*.

Copyright © 1995 by Ken Burns

eventually became an apartment building and an even emptier spot in the soul of every Brooklyn fan.

As the story of the arc of Ebbets Field that opens our series attests, the story of baseball is the story of America. Behind the exquisite play, the thousands of anxious games won and lost, the myriad heroic and not-so-heroic careers rising and falling lies a startlingly revealing mirror of our country. I am honored, deeply honored, and delighted to have this opportunity to speak with you this evening to celebrate the special messages the past, our common heritage, continually directs our way. Let us listen for a while. Too often as a culture we have ignored this joyful noise, becoming in the process blissfully ignorant of the power those past lives and stories and moments have over this moment and, indeed we hope, our unknown future.

When I was working more than ten years ago on a film about the Statue of Liberty, its history and powerful symbolism, I had the great good fortune to meet and interview Vartan Gregorian, who was then the president of the New York Public Library, and who is now the president of Brown University. After an extremely interesting and passionate interview on the meaning behind the statue for an immigrant like him — from Tabriz, Iran — Vartan took me on a long and fascinating tour of the miles of stacks of the New York Public Library. Finally, after galloping down one claustrophobic corridor, he stopped and gestured expansively. ‘This,’ he said, surveying his library from its guts, ‘this is the DNA of our civilization.’ He was saying that library and, indeed, all libraries, archives, and historical societies are the DNA of our society leaving an imprint of excellence and intention for generations to come. It occurs to me this evening as we behold the rich history of service of the American Antiquarian Society that we must certainly include this institution in that list of the DNA of our civilization, and it is with great pleasure that I come to you this evening to this magnificent city — often neglected — to share my thoughts about history. Thank you for that.

When I think about the great game of baseball, I first think about language and words, something close to the heart of each of us here, I believe. I also think of men, great men, heroic men, and, well, *unusual* men. Once in the early 1950s, Birdie Tebbetts, an old Red Sox man, was talking to Casey Stengel, baseball's Ancient Mariner, trying to glean from Casey the secret of his remarkable success—nine pennants in eleven years, five consecutive World Series. 'Casey was talking normal-like,' Birdie told us in an interview for our film, 'but then he said, "I never play a game without my man; I never play a game without my man."' Tebbetts thought, 'Oh no, now he's talking Stengelese. Until,' Tebbetts relates, Stengel said 'he never played a game without this one man who seemed to be the key to his success. He put this man in right field; he put him in center field; he put him in left field; he put him behind the plate; but he never played a game without his man.' 'I'll never forget that,' Birdie told us at the close of the interview.

Stengel's man was Lawrence Peter Berra, an immigrant bricklayer's son from the Dago Hill section of St. Louis. He got his nickname Yogi from his friends, who said he just *walked* like one. After flunking a high school test, Yogi was asked by his teachers, 'Don't you know anything?' He replied, 'I don't even suspect anything.' He was clumsy when he joined the Yankees. He played like the bottom man on an unemployed acrobatic team—one critic said—and there were those who thought him too odd looking for New York's elite team. One coach even called him 'the ape.'

But Stengel saw the greatness that was in him and brought back the great Bill Dickey to teach him the finer points of playing behind the plate. Berra quickly became one of the greatest catchers in baseball history. He once went 148 straight games and 950 chances without a single error. He played in an incredible and record seventy-five World Series games and hit seventy-one times during the course of them and was three times named the American League's Most Valuable Player. Like Stengel, though, Berra

became as well known for what he said off the field as for what he did on it. And this is where the words come in that I mentioned before.

'Ninety percent of hitting is mental,' he once said. 'The other half is physical.'

'You can observe a lot by watching.'

'If fans don't want to come out to the park, nobody is going to stop them.'

When the wife of Mayor John V. Lindsay of New York said he looked very cool in his new summer suit, Yogi said, 'Thanks, you don't look so hot yourself.'

When he was introduced to Robert Briscoe, the first Jewish mayor of Dublin, Ireland, Yogi sighed and said, 'Ah, only in America.'

He was once asked what he would do if he found a million dollars, and he said with a straight face, 'If the guy was poor, I'd give it back to him.'

Particularly helpful to me during this long promotional tour:

'Why buy good luggage,' Yogi said. 'You only use it when you travel.'

'I usually take a two hour nap,' he declared one day, 'between one and four in the afternoon.'

'When you get to the fork in the road, take it.'

My personal favorite:

'If you don't go to their funeral, they won't go to yours.'

And he also said, 'It ain't over till it's over.' You know, critics questioned whether he ever really said some of his most celebrated maxims, but of course Yogi had a ready answer for them, too. He said, 'I didn't say half the things I've said.'

For many of us, we are brought to our history in just this fashion, with story, memory, anecdote, feeling. These emotional connections become a kind of glue which makes the most complex of past events stick in our minds and particularly in our hearts, permanently a part of who each of us is now. But for most of the life of this republic, the way we have formerly told our history was from the top down. This has been called the history of the state or of great men, and it basically focuses only on presidents and wars and generals. It relies, like certain utterly discredited current

economic policies, on an erroneous belief that this history trickles down and touches experiences common to us all. It rarely does. It does exhibit, or has exhibited, an understandable arrogance, and we have had to rely on family memory and community recollection for the really good stuff. Or at least the stuff that made all that political history somehow meaningful. But as we have grown older as a country, as we have moved around more, lost touch with place more, those personal histories have dried up for most people and we as a people have begun to forget. History became a kind of castor oil of dry dates and facts and events with little meaning; something we knew was good for us, but hardly good tasting. History became just another subject, not the great pageant of everything that has come before this moment.

About twenty or thirty years ago, we woke up partially to this problem and began to insist on relevance in our teaching of history and on a new social history that would focus on real people doing real and recognizable things. This would be history from the bottom up, not top down, and people would respond. They did not. Relevance became an excuse for not even teaching history, and the new social history became so bogged down in statistical demographics and microperceptions that history began to sound like the reading of the telephone book. A new arrogance replaced the old—equally understandable, I suppose, but equally devastating to the national memory. Someone expressed this new tyranny quite well when they said that a history of Illinois could be written without ever once mentioning Abraham Lincoln. Something obviously had to change, and I'm pleased to report that in some ways it has.

We have, as an academic community, begun to speak of a synthesis of the old and the new histories, a way to combine the best of the top-down version—still inspiring, even with its great-men addiction (those great men did do great things)—with the bottom-up version; so inspiring, too, at times with the million heroic acts of women, minorities, labor, ordinary people. And we've begun to use new media and new forms of expression to tell our histories,

breaking the stranglehold the academy has had on historical exchange for the last hundred years. Remember, until we adopted the German academic model at the end of the nineteenth century, our greatest historians like Francis Parkman and Henry Adams were essentially amateurs—popular writers concerned with speaking to large audiences, not just a handful of colleagues and scholars—unconcerned with how one wrote, or more important, who was listening. Listen to what Francis Parkman had to say about the historian's responsibility. 'Faithfulness to the truth of history,' he wrote, 'involves far more than a research, however patient and scrupulous, into special facts. Such facts may be detailed with the most minute exactness and yet the narrative taken as a whole may be unmeaning or untrue. The narrator must seek to imbue himself with the life and spirit of the time. He must study events in all their bearings, near and remote; in the character, habits, and manners of those who took part in them. He must himself be, as it were, a sharer or spectator of the action he describes.'

It's a wonderful quote. It seems to me that the telling of history is a tension, a magnificent tension, between art and science. The science of history would enumerate the myriad details equally without discrimination—that's the telephone book at its worst. The art of history, on the other hand, has produced *Gone With The Wind* and, worse than that, *Birth of Nation* and recent miniseries dramas about the Civil War which try to convince us that it was not brother against brother but heaving bosom against heaving bosom. Good history has always struck a balance between these two sides, never allowing formal considerations to overwhelm and capsize the truth of events, nor allowing a dry recitation of fact to render its meaning unintelligible, or worse, boring. In an age of changing media, these dangers and pitfalls, though, become even more critical—require even more of our vigilance and attention—if we are to survive. For it is a question of survival without any past—certainly the current national elective—and we will deprive ourselves of the defining impressions of our being.

Baseball is played everywhere, in parks, in playgrounds and prison yards, in back alleys and farmers' fields, by small children and old men, raw amateurs and millionaire professionals. It is a leisurely game that demands blinding speed, the only game in which the defense has the ball. It follows the seasons, beginning each year with the fond expectancy of springtime and ending with the hard facts of autumn. Americans have played baseball for more than 200 years, while they conquered a continent, warred with one another and with enemies abroad, struggled over labor and civil rights and the meaning of freedom. At its heart lie mythic contradictions—a pastoral game, born in crowded cities; an exhilarating democratic sport that tolerates cheating and has managed to exclude as many as it has included; a profoundly conservative game that often manages to be years ahead of its time. It is an American odyssey that links sons and daughters to fathers and grandfathers, and it reflects a host of age-old American tensions between labor and management, scandal and reform, virtue and corruption, the individual and the collective. It is a haunted game in which every player is measured against the ghost of all who have gone before him. Most of all, it is about time and timelessness, speed and grace, failure and loss, imperishable hope and coming home.

In 1846, while working for the Brooklyn *Eagle*, a part-time journalist and sometime poet named Walt Whitman observed, 'In our sundown perambulations of late, through the outer parts of Brooklyn, we have observed several parties of youngsters playing base, a certain game of ball. Let us go forth a while and get better air in our lungs. Let us leave our close rooms. The game of ball is glorious.' Walt Whitman knew, as perhaps most of us here this evening know, that there is something extremely revealing about this national pastime of ours, that it rewards study, that at its most superficial and profound levels, it mirrors precisely the country and those strange and remarkable people who like to call themselves Americans. Quite often, though, we confuse our studies and dim the great lamp that is our past with the mistaken notion that

the only real history is wars and generals and presidents. We neglect at our peril, I believe, the true inner life of our country, the myriad heroic acts of people very much like you and me, who in their aggregate tell us as much, if not more, about ourselves than the great men whose statues line the avenues and squares of our magnificent capital. Don't get me wrong—those great men did do, as I said, great things, and provide for me a real pantheon of heroes whose lives and examples animate the best. But often to get a truer sense of who we are, where we have been, and by extension, where we are going, we absolutely must look at our past from the bottom up or from a different angle: at labor, the people who do the work, at women, at minorities seemingly outside the mainstream we like to call our history. We must look to the so-called ordinary people whose lives and examples animate the best in me, animate the best in us. And we need to look at how we make our national myth, that is to say how we lie and invent ourselves for posterity. One of the great lessons I've learned in nearly two decades of amateur history making, is how if you can distinguish between fact and myth or legend, how very revealing that myth or legend is. If you tell me the truth about something, I learn one thing. If you lie to me, and I know you have lied or discover that in the course of my investigations, I learn many things. You speak volumes.

Listen. One summer day in 1839 in Cooperstown, New York, on the shores of Lake Otsego, the local academy was playing a game of town ball against Green's Select School. The rules of town ball were so loose that every hit was fair and boys sometimes ran headlong into one another. That day an academy player named Abner Doubleday sat down and on the spot drew up the rules for a brand new game and called it baseball. That same Abner Doubleday would eventually become a hero at the Battle of Gettysburg, and his game would become the national pastime. Or so the legend has it. Abner Doubleday really was a distinguished soldier, but he was at West Point, not Cooperstown, that summer, never claimed



to have had anything to do with baseball, may never have even seen a professional game, and when he died after a long and illustrious career, the *New York Times* did full justice to this remarkable human being and never once mentioned the word baseball. The game's real history is more complicated and, to my mind, much more interesting.

For more than four years, I was engaged in producing and directing a nine-episode, or nine-inning—as perhaps most of you now know we called each part—documentary series on the history of baseball. It is longer than *The Civil War* series—eighteen-and-a-half hours to be precise—and we broadcast it on PBS starting in September 1994. I am pleased to report that the response has been overwhelming. We have received more letters at this stage than we did for *The Civil War*. People have shared with us baseball bats that they have made for us; paintings of Jackie Robinson they have done; the phone rings off the hook; and we've been, as a real barometer of your effect on the culture, the subject of dozens and dozens of editorial cartoons. One which I proudly displayed to my daughters one afternoon showed a group of young, impressionable children gathered around a baseball, obviously ogling the signature and saying, 'Oooh, Ken Burns.' At that moment, my oldest daughter said, 'Yes, but someone just faxed us a new cartoon,' and it showed a bleary-eyed couple sitting on a couch as the television was going and a huge balloon over the television said, 'Coming soon to PBS: "O. J." A 2,575 hour documentary.' And the man on the couch turns to his wife and says, 'Ken Burns has got to be stopped.'

Like *The Civil War*, the baseball series featured old and, in many cases, rare archival photographs, particularly from the game's relatively unknown nineteenth-century days. That period, by the way, was filled with complaints about greedy players making too much money, drug and alcohol abuse by the players, gambling scandals that forced the greatest stars from the game for life, and an overbearing meddlesome owner in New York City who fired his manager every year, ruining his team and ended up being

booed by his own fans. And a near constant complaint since as far back as 1869—the year of the first professional game—was that the game just wasn't what it used to be when the writer was a young boy. Sound familiar?

Like the Civil War series, *Baseball* featured period music, a complicated sound-effects track that helped make those old photographs come alive and a chorus of voices reading first-person historical quotes from ballplayers, newspaper men, poets, kings, and fans. Once again, these quotes were read by the finest men and women in arts and letters today: Gregory Peck, Gregory Hines, Eli Wallach; Julie Harris, Ossie Davis, Paul Roebing; John Turturro, Adam Arkin, Aidan Quinn, Michael Moriarty; Studs Terkel, Arthur Miller, George Plimpton, and Garrison Keillor; John Cusack, Amy Madigan, Paul Winfield, and Thomas P. 'Tip' O'Neill, one of the great voices that we recorded just a few weeks before he died. (We recorded nearly sixty or so.) And the narration was read, I thought, quite wonderfully by an incredible human being, John Chancellor.

But unlike the Civil War series, we were working with dozens of hours of newsreel film from 1899 right up to the most recent network coverage of the World Series. And we have conducted not a handful of interviews but well over eighty. We talked to Ted Williams and Hank Aaron and Mickey Mantle, old Negro league players and old major league scouts. We spoke to a hundred-year-old man who struck out Ty Cobb for the New York Highlanders in 1911, just before they became the New York Yankees. We spoke to Jackie Robinson's widow Rachel. Our Shelby Foote, as people constantly asked us while we were making the film, are many: historian John Thorn, writer Robert Creamer, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, editor Dan Okrent. But more than anyone else, the man who became the conscience of the film was Buck O'Neil, a former first baseman for the Kansas City Monarchs, the New York Yankees of the black leagues, and the first black coach in the major leagues. He was, of all the people I've had the great good fortune to interview, the most extraordinary man I have ever met.

We even spoke, by the way with Shelby Foote, who became our rabbit's foot. He told us about having met Babe Ruth when he was a little boy. You know, it is incredible to have interviewed a man who was on first-person relations with both Babe Ruth and Abraham Lincoln!

In the past fifteen years I have learned many things, but that history is our greatest teacher is perhaps the most important lesson. However, this enthusiasm is by no means shared by all. History and its valuable counsel continues to recede in importance and emphasis in schools across the land. The statistics are now very frightening. A majority of high school seniors do not know who Joseph Stalin or Winston Churchill were. They do not know of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence, which came first and what each signified. Many thought we fought *with* the Germans *against* the Russians in the Second World War, and a majority, believe it or not, could not tell the correct half century in which the Civil War—the most defining moment in our past—took place.

Why do we forget? Who and what is to blame? Well, it is my opinion that film and television mostly are to blame. I know that sounds strange coming from a film maker. Television is rapidly eroding the strength of our republic from within, substituting a distracting cultural monarchy for the diversity and variety and democracy promised in its conception and unveiling. Instead of dozens of options on the tube, we now see nearly the same thing everywhere, always presented the same way on dozens of clone-like channels. Television has equipped us as citizens to live only in an all-consuming and thereby forgettable and disposable present, blissfully unaware of the historical tides and movements that speak not only to this moment but to our future as well. This environment insures that we have no history and by so doing, I'm afraid to say, insures that we have no future. Even supposedly enlightened shows do more harm than good, wind up serving the same Morphean end by conferring a kind of cultural peerage on

the familiar talking heads that appear and reappear with striking sameness each night. Issues and ideas are merely pushed around the plate—never digested—by the same people, always the same people, engaged more with subtle one-upmanship among themselves and their TV alter egos than with the advancement of our understanding. In the worst of our television, we are addicted to personality, to the breathless embrace of celebrity, insuring as we go a tyranny of the televised over the great mass of us who are untelevised. There can be no communication in this world except among equals. How do we convince this monster of ours—television—to confer upon us the intelligence that we so clearly have? Except for rare moments of great national trauma or in the form-transcending moments of pure sport like baseball, television confers nothing but a potentially lethal light in our living rooms and in our minds.

Even the best of those in television, and I am afraid that includes those of us in public television, get caught up in constant self-congratulation about our role in the medium and near constant self-righteous invocation of shadowy chilling effects and influences that would limit our constitutionally initiated rights, always forgetting to stress to ourselves and to our audience how much the medium must improve, how little of its brain it actually uses, how by striving for a superficial idea of balance it has insured mediocrity. By its almost comic unearthing of simplistic villains, it has forgotten most of all to select for heroes.

Television can remind us too, if we let it. It is not too late. We know the horrible statistics about television, how it divides us, encourages us to see ourselves as economic units rather than spiritual beings, as Vartan Gregorian said as well. But we mustn't throw this medium out, turn away, or surrender its great power to those disingenuous people for whom it is merely the tool of some temporal or financial end. It is not enough to blame it all on television. Lincoln, in 1862, forced to place George McClellan, a slow, timid, but experienced general back in charge of his humiliated army, said we must use the tools we have.

Let us use these tools now. As we gradually become a country in a society without letter writing and diary keeping, more and more dependent on visual signs and language, television will become more and more an important part of the making of history. More and more we will be connected to the past by the images we have made—not the words—and they will become the glue that makes most of our memories. Eventually television will, I suggest, become (or could become) a new Homeric form told this time around an electronic campfire, the way we can, the way we must, speak to succeeding generations. It seems too easy to dismiss its cruder aspects, though they are there, to turn away from its clearly manipulative elements, or to cave in to its seductive power. We must learn how to use it, make it speak our truths, and tell our stories—our *histories*—in an honorable fashion.

‘Baseball,’ the poet Donald Hall told us in a filmed interview, ‘because of its continuity over the space of America and the time of America is a space where memory gathers.’ It was my intention to pursue the game and its memories and myths across the expanse of American history. We quickly developed an abiding conviction that the game of baseball offered a unique prism through which one could see refracted much more than a history of a simple sport.

Listen. This is the story of race, central to our larger narrative, crucial to baseball. When Jackie Robinson walked out onto a ball field in the spring of 1947, his glorious moment was the first real progress in civil rights since the Civil War, making this recent production of ours in a way a sequel, a literal sequel, to the Civil War series. That glorious moment occurred not at a lunch counter in North Carolina, not on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, not in a school in South Carolina or Topeka, not even in the institutions of our military, but on the diamonds of our so-called national pastime. At that moment, when that proud grandson of a slave made his way to first base at Ebbetts Field, his miraculous and heroic example, turning his cheek against the thousands of racial slights, threats, and abuse that he would face would be watched with awe and gratitude by a young junior at Morehouse

College in Atlanta, Georgia, named Martin Luther King. In a sense, American social history made a profound turn that April afternoon.

Jackie Robinson's epic story is not the whole of it. For decades African-Americans struggled to offset the prejudice in their country and in their national game by creating and managing and owning teams and leagues of separate but athletically equal talent. And when Jackie finally did arrive, when baseball became in truth what it had always claimed to be — the *national* pastime — the struggle did not stop, as it has not stopped in our country at large. Curt Flood and Henry Aaron were ironically forced to confront again and again the pernicious racism that persists in this favored land, founded as it was more than 200 years ago on the most noble principle yet advanced in humankind, that all men were created equal.

We have tried to tell this rich story not as a footnote to American history, not as a Balkanized Black History Month — an unexpected, unfortunate detour in an otherwise 'white' narrative — but integrated fully within the entire scope of our American narrative.

From our first inning onward, when the all-black Pythian Base Ball Team of Philadelphia was banned from membership in the National Association of Baseball Players in 1867, just two years after two percent of our population had died settling, *supposedly*, that issue, our series has followed this remarkable story in every episode. We treat the expulsion of Moses Fleetwood Walker, Bud Fowler, and other great stars of the nineteenth century, the first blacks, by the way, in the major leagues in the 1880s. 'If I had not been quite so black,' Bud Fowler said one time. 'I might have caught on as a Spaniard or something of that kind. My skin', he said, 'is against me.' His skin in America was against him.

We look at the splendid and resourceful response of the black community to Jim Crow from Andrew 'Rube' Foster's great Chicago teams to W. E. B. Du Bois, who recruited boys to sell subscriptions to *The Crisis*, the journal of the new National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, by promising them

baseball equipment. 'Baseball is the most popular sport in the country,' Du Bois said, prefiguring decades of tenacious, grassroots struggle. 'In every hamlet, town, and city may be the future Rube Fosters romping over corner lots, batting, pitching, and learning how to play the game. Organize your team,' he said.

We meet Jimmy Claxton, the superb left-handed pitcher, who in 1916 played for the Oakland Oaks of the Pacific Coast League. He had been introduced to the club's owner by a part-Indian friend as a fellow member of his Oklahoma Indian tribe. The Z-Nut Candy Company rushed out a baseball card with Claxton's portrait on it, but just six days later, he was fired after another friend let slip that Claxton had black as well as Indian ancestry.

We meet Rube Foster again, this time in the 1920s as he heroically starts the Negro National League. We see the league, not as a bleeding heart tragedy, or worse as a slapstick minstrel show, but as a glorious evocation of black culture, the third largest black business in America: an athletic accompaniment to the Harlem Renaissance, the jazz age of Ellington, Basie, and Armstrong, an exuberant antidote to the Depression. For those who often call the 1920s and '30s in major league baseball the best it ever was in our national pastime—the age of Ruth, of Gehrig, of DiMaggio, the early days of Williams—I say to you, you cannot even call it the national pastime when systematically this country excluded ten percent of the population from the game, when the very best pitchers and hitters were excluded. How could it possibly be the best? And the best proof of that is that when grudgingly and sparingly African-Americans were finally included, they won the Most Valuable Player award in the National League nine of the next eleven years. This is *our* story as well.

Baseball is also the story of immigration and assimilation, as each wave of immigrants sought the permanent status of citizenship conveyed not by a piece of paper but by participation in the national pastime of their adopted land. First it was the Irish, then the Germans, the Poles, and other central Europeans. Then it was the Italians, the Greeks, and belatedly, the Africans, the Latins,

and the Asians, each group invigorating the game as it has our country's dynamic social fabric.

Baseball is the story of the ever-present tension between management and labor. From the beginning of professional baseball in the mid-nineteenth century to today, players have battled owners over the question of money and who would control the game.

This is the story of popular culture in advertising, of how myths have been made, of how the country really is, and how we would like to see ourselves. This is the story of heroes and, of course, this is the story of villains and fools. Carlisle, the great English historian, said that history is biography, that the most rewarding and dramatic study of our common past lay in the lives of great figures, and I can think of no other arena, including politics, where there are so many complicated and interesting figures, good and bad. And in our disposable culture it is interesting and encouraging to note that we don't dispose of our baseball heroes—Walter Johnson, Babe Ruth, or Jackie Robinson, whoever they may be—as readily as we do in other arenas. Tom Boswell, the great sports writer for the *Washington Post*, said, 'that is a wonderful thing to hand on to our children.'

This is the story of a restless, expanding nation, the story of the growth and decay of great cities and their rebirth, of the rise of popular media—newspapers, radio, television—of the exclusion, I'm sorry to say, of women. And this is the story of the best game that's ever been invented, a game whose actions summon up the most cherished feelings and forces we Americans have—time, memory, family, and home.

The game, it seems to me, is a repository of age-old American verities, of standards against which we continually measure ourselves and yet, at the same time, a mirror of the present moment in our modern culture including all of our most contemporary failings. When Michael Milken goes to jail for the excesses of the '80s, so does Pete Rose for the same kind of crimes. When we see the gridlock that has beset our culture, we can only look at the



strike in baseball—unsolvable now after so many weeks—as the manifestation of the same sad tendency.

But you know, we were hardly prepared for the complex emotions that the game summoned up for us, the accumulated stories and biographies, life lessons and tragedies, dramatic moments and classic confrontations that we encountered daily in our editing room and that began to suggest even more compelling themes. As Jacques Barzun, the Columbia University scholar, has written, 'Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America, had better learn baseball.' We had made it our point to learn not only that mind, but that heart as well over the last nearly five years.

Most of us here, whether we know it or not, are in the business of words, and we hope, with some reasonable expectation, that those words will last. But alas, especially today, those words often evaporate, their precision blunted by neglect, their insight diminished by the sheer volume of their ever-increasing brethren, their force diluted by ancient animosities that seem to set each group against the other. The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. said that we suffer today from 'too much *pluribus* and not enough *unum*.' Few things survive in these cynical days to remind us of the union from which so many of our personal as well as collective blessings flow. And it is hard not to wonder in an age when the present moment consumes and overshadows all else—our bright past and our dim, unknown future—what finally does endure. What encodes and stores the genetic material of our civilization, passing down to the next generation the best of us that we hope will mutate into betterness for our children and our posterity? Baseball provides one answer. Nothing in our daily life offers more of the comfort of continuity, the generational connection of belonging to a vast and complicated American family, the powerful sense of home, the freedom from time's constraints, and the great gift of accumulated memory than does our national pastime.

Walt Whitman said it well, 'It's our game, that's the chief fact of connection with it, America's game. It has the snap, go, fling of

the American atmosphere. It belongs as much to our institutions,'—listen to this— 'fits into them as significantly as our constitution's laws, is just as important in the sum total of our historic life.'

But maybe a contemporary voice ought to be the last one to listen to. Gerald Early, a superb writer and the director of the African and Afro-American Studies Department at Washington University in St. Louis, said it best I think. Speaking in an interview for our film which appears at the end of our introduction, he said, 'I enjoy the game because it's a beautifully designed game. It's a beautiful game to watch. But principally'—and this is interesting because he is a black man— 'because it makes me feel more American. It makes me feel connected to this culture, and I think,' he went on in conclusion, 'there are only three things that America will be known for 2,000 years from now when they study this civilization—the Constitution, jazz music, and baseball. They are the three most beautifully designed things this country has ever produced.'

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.