David W Fletcher, April 2000
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SEEING THE BIG STORY, A REVIEW OF WILLIAM A. HARPER'S *HOW YOU PLAYED THE GAME: THE LIFE OF GRANTLAND RICE*

William A. Harper's *How You Played the Game: The Life of Grandland Rice*[1] is a voluminous compilation of details, not just about Grantland Rice's life from 1880 to 1954 and his fifty-plus years of sportswriting, but also about the evolution of American sports during the first half of the twentieth century. The book abounds with stories, almost ad nauseam at times, about notable and not so notable sports figures, about Rice's peers and other sportswriters, concerning significant matches, races, games, and sporting events, and also about cultural, social, and political occurrences of national import. Harper nicely interweaves these events according to the influence of Rice and how he touched the sporting consciousness of the nation during what is dubbed The Golden Age of Sport.

The book draws in the reader gradually, almost unexpectedly, as it begins laboriously, then picks up momentum, and finally crescendos into the full-blown thesis stated explicitly in the final chapter, "A Sporting Epitaph." For this reason, the book must be read patiently and completely, for it is only in the conclusion that the author's prime intent comes together most forcefully. In the words of Victor O. Jones, Rice epitomized "innocence instead of guile, enthusiasm instead of cynicism, hope instead of despair, confidence instead of fear, fair play instead of victory at any price" (p. 529). In this respect, Rice infused the idea of chivalry into the myriad "trivial" sporting stories he wrote about during his career, and thereby preserved for

[1]Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999.

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sporting the role of "dignified culture-bearer." Sports so contextualized, according to Harper, is a "narrative that is perfectly honest, perfectly decent, perfectly real, and perfectly true." This is the "Big Story" that Rice sought to report, and "by finding this Big Story embedded in the thousands upon thousands of smaller sporting stories he and his colleagues faithfully covered during the first half of the twentieth century, Grantland Rice helped give positive shape to our national conscience and character. His telling of this Big Story was his most endearing and enduring scoop" (p. 530).

Harper traces thoroughly the life of Rice–ancestral roots in Alabama, his birth and early life in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, his classical education at Vanderbilt, the brief stint in professional baseball, his reporter debut with the *Nashville Daily News*, the move to Atlanta, his work for the *Cleveland News*, his marriage to Katherine Hollis, the return to Nashville, the opportunity for national exposure with the *New York Evening Mail*, his lengthy stay with the *New York (Herald) Tribune*, his military service during World War I, his image as prolific writer and Mr. Fix-It, his expanded work as a syndicate for the North American Newspaper Alliance, his weekly radio talk show and his dabbling with sports films, and finally his waning years and death. The life of Grantland Rice is portrayed in depth, but often the trail of information about Rice gets lost in what might appear to be extraneous material. But Harper keeps bouncing back from all the details to his unifying theme–Rice's philosophy of sport.

For Rice, sport was not an end in itself, but a means to something much more significant, something about life itself.

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> The increasing anonymity, rush, and boredom of the modern industrial city was compensated for somewhat by the familiarity, liveliness, color, and drama of the sporting world. Rice's ever-present light touch gave his readers the rational reassurance that he knew full well that sport was not to be taken literally as a life-and-death matter–it was only a game. Yet because so many people cared so deeply about sports and those who played it, Rice also took the sporting world, and his role within it, quite sincerely and earnestly, remaining faithful to what he considered sport's essential value: it was an active antidote to the nation's growing physical, intellectual, and moral passiveness, and to the trivializing tendencies of modern life (p. 228).

This attitude is especially prevalent in Rice's poem, "To Sport," which seems to elicit "some kind of transcendent significance to sport" (p. 227). For this very reason, he downplayed what was transitory in sport, such as scores, records, and fame (see p. 453). With moralistic fervor, Rice preached sportsmanship to his readers. "We start with a clean slate; amply equipped; without prejudices; with a love of fair play; with positive and independent opinions; in a spirit of helpfulness and progressiveness . . ." (p. 131), he quipped in an inaugural column. Even the moral lessons learned from golf and its "metaphysical definition" were lauded. "You are meant to play the ball as it lies, a fact that may help to toughen your own objective approach to life" (p. 216).

While such a connection between sport and deeper meanings might be viewed now as so much sentimentality and romanticism, for Rice it was perfectly legitimate. His classical education lent itself to an effervescent use of verse in his poetic reflections on sports and life. His lively mimicry of the likes of Kipling, Poe, Yeats, and Shelley smacks of a relic from a bygone age, an outmoded dinosaur (compare archaic football strategies, pp. 362-363), and Rice's prose today would be judged cumbersome and wordy, something that would not ring true to

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modern ears, nor would many in such an information saturated age take time to read it. But Rice lived his message and gave his gospel of sportsmanship an important measure of verisimilitude. With Rice, the man was the message–diligent, industrious, informed, friendly, compassionate, and fair. That these values were reflected in what he wrote was only natural, since his commentary was, to a large extent, an extension of who he was.

Rice's moralism no doubt made it easier for him to blow the whistle on violators of the norms of sportsmanship, although this provoked resentment by some writers. But Rice's corrective voice became important for the healthy evolutionary development of sport in the nation, and Rice covered many controversies, such as the legitimacy of gambling at horse races (p. 147), the use of "ringers" in college football games (p. 148), the violence in football (pp. 152ff.), the White Sox scandal of 1920 (pp. 263ff.),[2] the history of betting in baseball (pp. 275ff.), the question of amateur versus professional status in football a la the case of Harold "Red" Grange (p. 404), and the stripping of Jim Thorpe's Olympic medals by the Amateur Athletic Union (pp. 504-506). The watchful eye of Rice and many others guided the nation's sporting communities through a labyrinth of potentially destructive episodes. Rice's integration of moral uprightness, while by no means perfectly achieved, can be seen as beneficial for both the cohesion and the maintenance of each sporting event's healthy existence.

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[2]This scandal eked from Rice a rather harsh and reactionary judgment, at least by modern standards. He wrote of the perpetrators, "They are the ultimate scum of the universe, and even the spotted civilization of the present time has no place for them outside of a penitentiary" (p. 274).

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But even though Rice's philosophy was sound, there were inconsistencies in practice. With Rice, an attraction to greats like Babe Ruth fostered tolerance of Ruth's glaring faults (see p. 399; compare his fondness of Babe Didrikson and Bobby Jones). In this respect, Rice lacked objectivity in his attitude toward the transitory in sports–power, success, and fame. And when it came to black athletes, Harper suggests that "Rice did nothing to bring acceptance to interracial sporting events; he was little more than a typical and bigoted American sportswriter" (p. 168). Given the mores of the time, though, this judgment seems a little forced. Rice also was capable of what might be called "punitive judgment," notably, his refusal to acclaim boxers Jack Dempsey and Jess Willard as "fighting men" based upon their non-service during the Great War.

This latter episode, that Dempsey always resented, well illustrates another important feature of Rice's growing up with the American sports scene–the link or intersection between sports and the overall development of the nation. In the case of the two boxers, Rice, who had recently returned from wartime duty in France, could not bring himself to simply acknowledge Dempsey and Willard as "fighting men," a term, in Rice's mind, reserved for military men. The pain of such a recognition, and what it meant concerning those who fought and died in the war, was too great for Rice. In this, Rice was very much a child of his times, both influenced by and, in turn, influencing other events. Harper nicely details numerous such political and sociological events and their impact on Rice–the killing of Edward Ward Carmack (pp. 141ff.), the temperance movement (p. 147), growth in industry and technology along with the corresponding rise of advertising needs and media changes (p. 174), the Teddy Roosevelt assassination attempt

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(pp. 189-190), the Great War (pp. 230ff.), the Great Depression (pp. 434-438), and the evolution of sports and sportswriting prior to World War II (pp. 472ff.).

Especially good is Harper's broader characterization of Rice–his mechanical ineptness (i.e., he wore no watch, he never learned to drive, he could not operate a television set), his compassion, his aversion to both success and failure, his fear of radio and dislike of television, and his love of the outdoors. The affect of the death of friends on Rice, Christy Mathewson (pp. 401-402) and Ring Lardner (pp. 465-470) in particular, reveals the humanity of Rice. Further, Harper's contextual illumination of some of the situations that Rice had to deal with is superb, most notably, the controversy over Rice's hiring by the *Cleveland News* (pp. 124-125), the drama accompanying the fight between Georges Carpentier and Jack Dempsey (pp. 305-308), the description of the bout between Dempsey and Louis Angel Firpo (pp. 337-339), the title fights of Dempsey and James Joseph "Gene" Tunney (pp. 409ff.),[3] the radio dialogue with Ring Lardner (pp. 442-444), Tommy Armour's predictions about changes in sports (pp. 475-476), and the possible link between the agrarian philosophy of the Nashville Fugitives and Rice's own philosophy of sport (pp. 526-528). The thirty-eight photos clustered in two areas of the book are good, but placement with the appropriate text would be better. The full text of certain poems, such as the famous "Alumnus Football," would have been appreciated. The inclusion of the full

[3]Excepting the summation in the closing chapter, in my opinion this is the very best section of the book.

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text of a few of Rice's articles would have been nice. Finally, some sort of time line or chronology would be helpful.

The attractive characteristics of Grantland Rice–winning personality, athletic appearance, remarkable productivity, and influential career–unfortunately have not lessened his relative obscurity, except for a few famous quotes. This is quite a contrast with many of the early twentieth century sports heroes that Rice interacted with and reported on–Ruth, Dempsey, Tilden, McGraw, Cobb, Didrikson, Rockne, Thorpe, and Owen (see p. 17). Rice, who lauded the world of sport as more than fun and games, greater than entertainment or show business, championed for American sport a respectability based on the moral foundations of fairness, decency, and competence. Harper has done a good job of making him much more assessable to modern fans of American sport history.