

Cameron Hill

Swanson, Ryan A. *When Baseball Went White: Reconstruction, Reconciliation, and Dreams of a National Pastime*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

*When Baseball Went White* by Ryan A. Swanson is a masterclass in approaching baseball's color line from a different perspective. Unlike other baseball historians who have sought to understand the breaking of the color barrier and the integration that followed, Swanson seeks to understand the origin of the line itself. This book gives great insight into three cities, Washington DC, Richmond, and Philadelphia. The book is separated into three parts in which each city gets its spotlight. This structure allows the reader to see the perspective from different baseball hotbeds in the Northern, Central, and Southern parts of the East Coast immediately following the Civil War. Swanson throughout the book is looking to answer why African Americans were excluded from baseball.

Swanson's main overarching argument is that baseball's color barrier was created to try and nationalize baseball by excluding black players from being allowed to play professional baseball thanks to a "gentlemen's agreement" that prohibited black players from getting professional contracts. After such a devastating Civil War that ripped the nation to shreds, baseball was the key that could bring the nation together even if it meant excluding African Americans whom the war had just been fought to free. Swanson even hits at the hypocrisy of the reputation of baseball as an "America's Pastime" as it sought to exclude its citizens at the conception of its rising popularity.

The placement of this book is fitting for the creation of racial exclusion in the sport of baseball. Although now free, African Americans faced harsh racism and discrimination from every geographic location in the United States as is supported by Swanson's three-city approach. The nation as divided as it was after the Civil War seemed to agree that White men were at the

peak of existence and deserved a nation where all men were “free” but was ultimately run exclusively by white men.

Swanson’s engagement with his arguments and topic is second to none. Swanson does not seek out a single person to place the blame of the color line upon like many others. He analyzes Reconstruction and the people intertwined with baseball and society which makes his arguments so much stronger than just looking for an individual to blame. Swanson does mention individuals like Alexander Babcock, who is seen as the father of baseball in Richmond and who would become a key player in the color line "gentlemen’s agreement". Swanson explains that to grasp the initiation of the color barrier, the reader must understand the attitude and environment encasing the country during Reconstruction. This approach shows the vast amount and rich quality that Swanson has put into his research. The engagement of the book also makes it an enjoyable read that doesn’t overcomplicate the wording of the book with complex academic terminology.

The designation of chapters to specific cities is a nice touch of easy organization and a much-needed illustration of the different attitudes of the post-war United States. However, the only real critique I could muster is that jumping from city to city with a varying number of chapters between a city’s reoccurrence within the three parts of the book can be rather confusing at times. This can make it tough to completely recall what occurrences and details belong to a certain city without having to go back and reread.

Swanson is without a doubt a baseball history pioneer. The book is the first true attempt to look at the creation of the color-barrier which has the potential for Swanson to get lost in the droves of potential information and arguments he could make being the first to jump on this topic. His ability to make his argument of baseball being a victim of the social climate of

Reconstruction leaves the reader with a better understanding of a topic that has sadly often been overlooked. This book completely transcends the boundaries of baseball and is at times even useful for those who have more of an interest in Reconstruction-era history and its effects on African Americans with no baseball-tying motive. Swanson's masterpiece should be read by those who want to understand more about the failure of Reconstruction but more importantly, this book is for those who want to dig deeper into why Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color barrier in baseball was one of, if not the biggest moment in American sports history.