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kee leadership and political history the book would, unfortunately, be very disappointing.

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Jim Thorpe, World's Greatest Athlete. By Robert W. Wheeler. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979. 320 pp. \$12.50.

If a biography's success were determined solely by the quality of its creator's credentials and commitment, there could be nothing but praise for *Jim Thorpe, World's Greatest Athlete*. Robert W. Wheeler holds degrees in Education and History from both New York University and Syracuse University, where his advisor schooled him the techniques of "The controversial oral history approach" (p. xiii). Armed with that approach, and equipped with a tape recorder, Wheeler trekked more than ten thousand miles through twenty-three states to collect information and insights for his volume, seven years in the making. His was no hastily executed or easy research venture. Hitchhiking played a key role, as did the spare bedrooms of countless friends and admirers of "the world's greatest athlete." Not surprisingly, Wheeler's financial resources, as well as those of his relatives, received serious and frequent tests; and, unlike all Thorpe biographers before him (this writer included), he so ingratiated himself with Thorpe's family that he earned access to the athlete's personal scrapbook, the property of Thorpe's widow.

Yet neither unique access to that treasure nor unimpeachable credentials and commitment enable Wheeler to provide a convincing depiction of the internationally famous Native American. In his "Acknowledgements" section, he concedes that he has been "dismayed by the vagueness surrounding him [Thorpe] in life and death," and he promises "an honest treatment. . . [of] this supreme athlete" (p. xiii). Yet what emerges in subsequent pages is an unbalanced, unfocused, and occasionally inaccurate portrait. Wheeler, it seems, is so enamored with Thorpe's athletic accomplishments—the most fantastic, doubtless, in the annals of modern man—that he forgets, at times at least, that his subject is, first and foremost, not a hero but a human, a mortal as frequently

plagued by problems and injustices as favored by acclaim and adulation. Wheeler's defect as a biographer, understandable but nonetheless lamentable, is that he is so enthralled totally by Thorpe's athletic prowess that he accidentally saps him of that which courses through the veins of every individual, and that which is the very essence of effective biography: humanity.

Among the volume's more serious weaknesses are its opening pages. In "Chapter One, A Vigorous Youth," Wheeler elects to provide a simplistic portrayal both of Hiram P. Thorpe, Jim's father, and of Jim's relationship with that parent. In reality, there was nothing subtle or genteel about Hiram's bearing and preferences. Indeed, rather than being "the usually even-tempered father" (p. 18) that Wheeler describes, Hiram was the whiskey-drinking, gunslinging, law-defying scourge of the Indian-occupied lands adjacent to the North Canadian River, within walking distance of the Sac and Fox cabin in which Jim was born. Sizable, Hiram possessed equally large appetites for the pleasures of the world, and he allowed no social norms and few individuals, Jim included, to keep him from satisfying them. Polygamous, and fathering at least nineteen legally identified children during his approximately fifty years, he earned Jim's respect, if not obedience, because of his awesome physical skills, especially those demanded in horse-handling and hunting. Clashes of will characterized the pair's relationship during Jim's early years, most often because of schooling, the advantages of which eluded Jim. Reflecting the discord was Hiram's letter of December 13, 1903, to Superintendent W. C. Kohlenberg of the Sac and Fox Agency, to whom Hiram conceded that "I Cannot do any thing with him [sic]" and that "he is getting worse very day [sic]." Hiram's proclamations are hardly those of a father possessing a deft touch with his teen-age son; nor are they consistent with Wheeler's description, undocumented and unexplained, of Hiram at the Thorpes' "main meal," leading "the members of his family in prayer" and instilling "in them the knowledge that all things made by God are beautiful" (p. 11).

Significantly, the letter to Kohlenberg does not appear in Wheeler's volume; it does not gain even fleeting mention. Yet in another recently published Thorpe biography, it figures prominently, as do a horde of other no less intelligently evaluated communications, anecdotes, and details. In *The Best of the Athletic Boys*, published in 1975 by Doubleday and Company, Jack Newcombe, executive editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club,

illuminates all periods of the athlete's tumultuous life, and especially Jim's first and final years. Doubtless, Newcombe provides a skillful, amply documented depiction of all that shaped, constituted, and followed Jim's athletic career. Unlike Wheeler, he leaves no specific or nuance unattended; the man, as well as the athlete, emerges, occasionally moody, often unpredictable, always sensitive. Newcombe's words, like his information, are equal to the task he sets before himself: to delineate, as the sub-title of his volume demands, "the white man's impact on Jim Thorpe."

No such goal motivates or propels Wheeler's efforts, and thus those efforts fall short of providing the graphic and gripping saga that was Jim's life. There are facts enough, certainly, but Wheeler fails to focus them, to fashion them into a powerful whole. Jim's three marriages, his bouts with alcoholism, his carelessness with money, his many demeaning jobs outside and after athletics—all these gain only generalizations and apologies from Wheeler. They simply appear, glossed and unexplained—and, far more important, unrelated to one another. A collage-like effect is created, frustratingly incomplete for the serious reader.

Disconcerting, too, to such a reader are the factual inaccuracies that occasionally surface. Jim was born not in 1888 but, as Newcombe notes, in 1887. During the summer of 1910, moreover, he did not sign "up with the Fayetteville entry" (p. 80) of the Eastern Carolina Baseball League; he began that season with another club in the same league, the Rocky Mount Railroaders, with whom he had performed during the previous summer, and he joined the Fayetteville team on August 13, late in the baseball campaign, only because the Railroaders' management traded him (R.W. Reising, *Jim Thorpe: Tar Heel*, [Rocky Mount: Communique', Inc., 1974] p. 17). Nor, obviously, did the Eastern Carolina League fold before the 1910 season had "reached the halfway mark" (p. 80); the league, with Jim as a key performer, completed that season with a September championship playoff (*Jim Thorpe: Tar Heel*, pp. 18-19). Finally, Jim did not spend the entirety of the 1922 baseball season in the Pacific Coast League, as Wheeler suggests (p. 166); he split that season between the Pacific Coast League and the Eastern League, compiling not the .308 batting average that Wheeler identifies (p. 166), but a .335 mark (R. W. Reising, *Jim Thorpe: The Story of an American Indian* [Minneapolis: Dillon Press, Inc., 1974] p. 39).

Yet a handful of factual flaws are inconsequential in evaluating the total book. So, too, are a comparable number of questionable

interpretations that Wheeler evolves, the most provocative of which is, perhaps, his argument that Charles Clancy, Jim's manager at Fayetteville whom he inaccurately calls "Jim's manager at Rocky Mount" (p. 142), was the person "inadvertently responsible" in 1913 for exposing Jim as a professional baseball player in 1909 and 1910. Few people, this writer included, are as certain as Wheeler that it was Clancy who, inadvertently or not, reported that Jim was no amateur during the 1912 Olympiad. The culprit might well have been any one of a number of persons, including B. C. Stewart, a one-time Eastern Carolina League player; Pete Boyle, another former Eastern Carolina League performer, but never, as Wheeler alleges, "a teammate of Jim's" (p. 80); and Sam T. Mallison, a Rocky Mount sportswriter. Jim himself, in fact, although not necessarily the best judge, always contended that it was Mallison, not Clancy, who had first leaked the news about his Carolina professionalism (*Jim Thorpe: Tar Heel*, p. 30).

But—again—problems with facts and interpretations do not keep the book from the greatness for which it reaches. What it does is reveal Wheeler's unwillingness or inability to probe beneath the surface of the impressive amount of material that he assembles to illuminate the mind and heart of a man who was not merely the "world's greatest athlete" but, far more important, an uncanny human being, a uniquely American phenomenon both blessed and cursed by uncommon gifts, challenges, and circumstances.

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