***Arete* Review of Bill Nowlin, *Tom Yawkey: Patriarch of the Boston Red Sox* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018)**

            Tom Yawkey owned the Boston Red Sox from 1932 (when he bought the team for $1.2 million) until his death in 1976, at which point a trust in the Yawkey name controlled by his second wife, Jean, maintained ownership. During that time the Red Sox never won a World Series. Yet the team came to be among the iconic franchises in American sports. The team’s failings became more legendary than its successes, with its star players – Ted Williams, Carl Yastrzemski, Jimmie Foxx, and myriad others – rising to fame and beloved by Yawkey himself, who was probably a bit too cozy and accommodating of the men who played for him.

            Yawkey earned his millions the old-fashioned way: he inherited them. But he was no spoiled brat. As a business magnate and as sole owner of the Red Sox he put on no airs. He dressed casually and was friendly with everyone, including employees who saw him as an ordinary guy. He enjoyed a few drinks, oftentimes more, and spending time with the few people, usually men, he allowed into his inner circle. He generally enjoyed simple pleasures. Though he spent most of the baseball season in Boston he stayed at a suite in the Four Seasons rather than own a home in the area, and as much as anything he liked spending time at his sprawling rural property in South Carolina, which after his death would become a giant nature reserve.

            In *Tom Yawkey: Patriarch of the Boston Red Sox* Bill Nowlin has written what is sure to be the definitive biography of Yawkey, one of the most significant professional sports owners of his era. Nowlin is an almost impossibly prolific writer who has published some three-dozen books on Red Sox-related topics alone, never mind numerous other baseball books, many with the imprimatur of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), for which he has been an important figure, as that organization’s longstanding Vice President but perhaps especially in the realm of SABR publications as an author and editor. In *Tom Yawkey* he has presented a sprawling biography, but also a history of the Red Sox and even baseball itself during a crucial era.

            Yawkey legitimately enjoyed being an owner. He enjoyed taking batting practice or participating in fielding drills, especially when he was a younger owner not so far removed from his time as essentially an intramural college player at Yale. He liked being around ballplayers and became chummy with many of them – perhaps too chummy. He had a soft spot for the men who played for him and he paternalistically supported them – providing aid when they needed it and paying some of the most generous salaries in the league – generous enough that some of the other owners felt that he disrupted the baseball business model by blowing the pay scale out of whack.

Many, supporters and detractors, believed that Yawkey ran a country club at Fenway Park that made his players complacent and soft and that perhaps contributed to the team’s inability to win a World Series – the Red Sox played seven-game championship-series thrillers in 1946, 1967, and 1975, but fell short each time. It is not that Yawkey was not a tough competitor, and he desperately wanted his team to win. And even those who criticized elements of his ownership respected him, and Yawkey became one of the most influential owners in the most important sport in mid-20th Century America. Yawkey had diverse enough interests that he did not need the Red Sox – indeed, the team surely was among his least productive assets on the balance sheet – but he loved owning them and in the process, the shy, almost retiring Yawkey became a Boston civic treasure even though few saw him outside of the owner’s box.

            Nowlin skillfully navigates Yawkey’s life and time as Red Sox owner. He also spends a great deal of productive time on the legacies Yawkey left after his 1976 death, with a large hunk of the book devoted to his second wife Jean Yawkey’s tenure in charge, the heated machinations to control the team after her death, and the important, generous work of Yawkey’s charitable foundation, which continues to flourish, especially in the Greater Boston area and in Yawkey’s beloved South Carolina. It is these legacies that should have cemented Yawkey as a pivotal figure in Boston. Yawkey Way, one of the streets that flanks Fenway Park (and arguably one of the most famous streets surrounding any American stadium), is but the most visible memorial tribute to the Red Sox’ legendary owner. Under ordinary circumstances this would be enough to grant Yawkey the sort of secular sainthood bestowed on certain kinds of larger-than-life civic figures.

            But there is an exception, and the exception is a big one.

            The Boston Red Sox infamously did not integrate until 1959 when Pumpsie Green joined the team, making Boston’s American League entry the last to bring black players into the fold. And despite the protests of some, it was not for lack of opportunities that the Red Sox lagged in the most important social issue of the era and indeed in baseball’s and America’s history. The team had myriad opportunities not only to integrate, but to lead professional baseball. As far back as 1945 the Red Sox held a tryout at Fenway Park for Jackie Robinson and other potential black players where it has long been alleged that someone yelled into the expanse of Fenway Park, “Get those N\*\*\*\*\*s off the field.” No one knows if the story is true, and if it is true, who shouted the epithets. But because of the tortured racist history of the Red Sox the story’s factual truth gave way to a larger truism: The Red Sox were not only the last to desegregate, they were inhospitable to black players. They had an inside shot at signing Willie Mays and botched it. They could have become a powerhouse by leading the way on racial issues and instead they lagged.

            And so in the book’s final full chapter Nowlin tackles the inevitable question: Was Tom Yawkey a racist? Nowlin finds no evidence of Yawkey using racial epithets, enforcing a color barrier, or treating black players (or the few black employees the Red Sox had) contemptuously. That was not Yawkey’s way. At the same time, Yawkey was sole owner of the Red Sox. He had no one to whom to report or even to share information or decision-making. He did, however, delegate authority, and it is clear that if Yawkey was not a racist some who worked for him in positions of power to make personnel decisions were, and felt emboldened enough to ignore or dismiss the signing of black athletes that would stain the franchise as racist. At best Yawkey was naïve and placed faith in racists. At worst, the buck stopped in the owner’s box and thus there the accountability for the franchise’s failings lie. At minimum Nowlin holds Yawkey to account for that much, and the implication is certainly that he not only could have but very much should have done more.

            Weighing in at 531 pages, with 436 pages of text, 51 of endnotes, and another 12 of index alongside a section of photographs it is difficult to imagine a more comprehensive biography of Tom Yawkey, whose legacy hovers over Fenway Park even to this day. It is even more difficult to imagine future biographers and historians deciding to top this effort. The absence of a suitable biography of “The Patriarch of the Boston Red Sox” was once stark. That gap has now been filled and ably so.

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