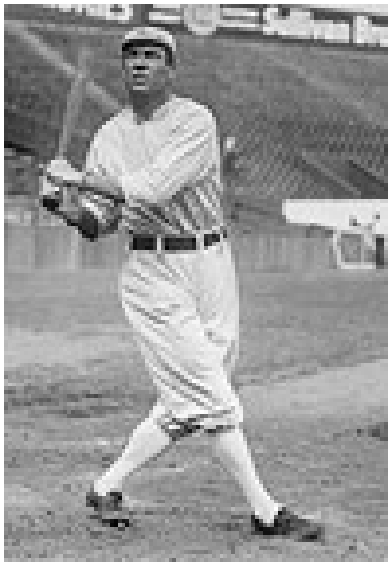
JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes:
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

1920 World Champion Cleveland Indians Rocked

Asinof, Eliot. ***Eight Men Out***. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1963).
Longert, Scott H. ***The Best They Could Be: How the Cleveland Indians Became the Kings of Baseball, 1916-1920.*** (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, An Imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2013).
Sowell, Mike. ***The Pitch That Killed: Carl Mays, Ray Chapman and the Pennant Race of 1920.*** (New York: Collier Books, 1989).



When you're a Cleveland Indians fan, you celebrate when you can.

To the date, as I write, October 12, 2020, it is 100 years to the day since the Tribe and their soon-to-be-changed moniker won their first of only two World Series championships. They bested five games to two the Brooklyn Dodgers (who were sometimes called Robins in honor of their manager Wilbert Robinson). In those days it was a nine-game series, the Tribe closing it out in seven by winning the last four games.

As charter members of the American League, that means in only two out of 120

seasons did our heroes raise the gonfalon celebrating their dominance of all of professional baseball.

Or about once every 60 years have they prevailed. They won again in 1948, which means technically the Tribe has won the World Series in my lifetime, but my two-year-old self did not mark the occasion.

And Pirates fans, of whom I am a sort of second cousin, complain!

Hell, the Pirates won twice my first decade in Pennsylvania – 1971 and 1979. Granted, they have not won since.

Marred by misadventures staining my deck this spring, the cap pictured atop the books in this "Note" is an "authentic replica" of a 1920 Cleveland Indians cap. More appropriately in the adjoining photo it adorns the pate of Tris Speaker, Cleveland's Hall of Fame player-manager. Two observations: 1) most photos of the 1920 Tribe have them sporting blue caps with a white "C" – not my white cap with a blue "C"; 2) the phrase "authentic replica" itself teases with all manner of implications. Is the cap "authentic" or is it a "replica" or is it an "authentic replica," which phrase means what, exactly?

In advertising there is the concept of weasel words that appear to mean one thing, but actually mean something else. The best example is "virtually," which most people confuse with its root *virtu* and assume that it means something like truth or genuine. It means, in fact, that whatever is being described is true in theory but not, it turns out, *in fact.* For example, this "previously owned" automobile is *virtually* new; well, no. It is old and used, not new at all and virtue has naught to do with it.

So, my deck-stained cap is a replica of a 1920 Cleveland Indians cap – an authentic replica but not actually the real thing.

Speaker's nickname, by the way, the Grey Eagle, is one of baseball's better nicknames. It speaks, no pun intended, to his fleetness afoot as both a great defensive center fielder and adroit base runner, but also to his prematurely graying hair, which made him seem old at 30. Speaker also introduced the platoon system to baseball in which two players shared a defensive position alternating games depending upon with which hand the opposing pitcher threw. It was later perfected by Casey Stengel, whose New York Yankees of the 1950s tormented my early years of baseball fandom by consistently outclassing the Tribe. Except, however, for 1954 in which Cleveland set the then record for wins in a single-season, 111, only to get swept by the New York Giants and Willie Mays in that fall's World Series.

It was in Game One of that ill-fated series that Willie Mays made "The Catch" of a long drive off the bat of Tribe first baseman Vic Wertz. In the Polo Grounds' cavernous centerfield, Wertz's 420 plus-feet drive was snagged over-the-shoulder by Mays, who then pivoted and returned the ball to the infield preventing the base runners from advancing. In any other ballpark, it would have been a three-run home run, nod to Earl Weaver, the Tribe wins, and history goes in a different direction. Alas, the score remained tied 2-2 and the Tribe lost 5-2 in extra innings.

It is the fate of Cleveland Indians' fans that the greatest catch in baseball history, our guy hit the ball!

A video of that infamous catch can be seen here.

In addition to Tribe fans' belated gloating over their grandfather and great-grandfather's team doing what only one other Tribe nine has managed in 120 years, what else is of note in that 1920 triumph? Well, for one thing, there were six future Hall of Famers afield in that series, three each for the Tribe and Dodgers. For the Tribe, future Hall of Famers included Speaker, spitballing pitcher Stan Coveleski, and rookie shortstop Joe Sewell. For the Dodgers, Wilbert Robinson, Rube Marquard, and Zack Wheat gained Hall of Fame honors.

Mike Sowell's ***The Pitch That Killed*** connects Cleveland's bittersweet season to major league baseball's striving to overcome the stain of the 1919 Black Sox Scandal by allegedly juicing the ball giving birth to the age of the home run. In the process, he elaborates on Eliot Asinof's classic treatment of the Black Sox Scandal in ***Eight Men Out***. Scott Longert's ***The Best They Could Be*** plods along recounting Tribe seasons from 1916 to 1920 as owner Jim Dunn attempted to build a "Forest City" dynasty in that pre-Yankee era. Longert is a good source of details, but his prose is about as exciting as watching oatmeal cool. Sowell and Asinof, however, can really write. Their books belong in any baseball fan's library.

1920 was a turning point season in baseball history. The season and Series were marked by several firsts, a tragedy, and, for all but New York Yankee fans, a harbinger of future gloom. For Yankee fans, the joy was just beginning.

What were 1920's World Series firsts?

Despite their overall historic mediocrity, the Tribe has an impressive record of baseball firsts. Although they did not integrate major league baseball, Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers did that in April 1947, the Tribe did integrate the American League. On July 5, 1947 in Chicago's Comiskey Park, Larry Doby joined the Tribe directly from the Negro Leagues' Newark Eagles. Doby was soon joined by pitcher Satchell Paige. Doby and Paige were the first African-American players to win a World Series championship when the Tribe defeated the Boston Braves in 1948's World Series. Both Doby and Paige are members of Baseball's Hall of Fame. The Cleveland Indians also hired baseball's first African American manager, Frank Robinson, who in 1975 was the Tribe's player-manager. In his first managerial game, Robinson, in true baseball storybook fashion, hit a home run in his first at bat.

Several firsts occurred in the 1920 fall classic, as baseball fans insist upon calling their championship final: the first and only World Series triple play, the first World Series grand slam, and the first World Series home run by a pitcher.

More amazing, all three transpired in Game Five!

The Tribe's Bill Wambsganss (more often, for obvious reasons, simply called "Wamby") turned the second of 15 unassisted triple plays in major league baseball history, but the first and only one ever in either the expanded post-season playoffs of current major league baseball or in the World Series since 1901. As most unassisted triple plays, this one happened at second base. With runners on first and second in the top of the fifth, Brooklyn's Clarence Mitchell lined to Wamby at second, who moving to his right never broke stride, stepped on second doubling that runner and turning to throw to first saw the runner advancing from first stopping abruptly in front of him. Wamby reached

out and touched him to complete the triple play. The hometown Cleveland crowd sat stunned, not at first grasping what had just transpired. They then burst into roaring joy.

In the colorful sports writing of the era, Mike Sowell quotes Ring Lardner as saying, “It was the first time in World Serie history that a man named Wambsganss had ever made a triple play assisted by consonants only.” [1]

Cleveland’s Elmer Smith hit the first grand slam in World Series history in the bottom of the first. The first three Tribe batsmen to face Burhleigh Grimes, Brooklyn’s spitballing future Hall of Famer, all reached base setting the proverbial table for the Tribe’s Elmer Smith, who hit a 1-2 pitch over League Park’s short right field screen for a 4-0 Tribe lead.

In the bottom of the fourth, Tribe pitcher Jim Bagby hit a three-run homer into the center field stands, the first home run in World Series history by a pitcher. The Tribe won the game, 8-1. Brooklyn manager Wilbert Robinson allegedly said, “I’ve been in baseball 40 years and never saw one like this before.” [2]

The tragedy? As Mike Sowell chronicles in ***The Pitch That Killed,*** the tragedy was the death of Tribe shortstop Ray Chapman. Chapman is the only player in the history of major league baseball to die from an on-field injury. Chapman was hit in the head by a pitch from New York Yankee submariner (throwing almost underhand) Carl Mays in an August game at the Polo Grounds. Chapman, a popular fixture in Cleveland not only because of his prowess at shortstop for the Tribe, but also as a decent young man with a sense of civic engagement and responsibility. 1920 was to be his last season as a professional baseball player. In the spring of 1920, shortly before the season began, Chapman married Kathleen Daly, daughter of a prominent Cleveland businessman. Chapman was going to work with his father-in-law in the family business.

Mays, in his submarine style, had a reputation for pitching inside and attempting to intimidate hitters. In that era before batting helmets were used, pitchers who worked inside and could control their pitches had an edge. Complicating factors were that in those days, balls were not thrown out of play if they got scratched or were marred in some way. They were used until they were unplayable, often becoming dark and dingy and hard to see in the fading light of late afternoon ballgames. Recall, this was well before night baseball and modern lighting.

In any event, working inside, Mays hit Chapman in the head. Chapman may have never seen the discolored ball in the afternoon shadows. Mays later said the sound of the ball hitting Chapman’s head was so loud, he thought it had hit Chapman’s bat. He fielded the soft grounder back to the mound and threw the now prone Chapman out at first. Chapman collapsed at the plate, bleeding from his ear. He died later in the hospital. His pregnant wife, summoned from Cleveland, collapsed when she learned he had died. [3]

Mays, a surly fellow with limited friends in major league baseball, saw his career shadowed by the incident. He was actually a highly accomplished pitcher, who finished his career with 207 wins and a WAR (wins about replacement) of 51.1, which places him in the top 100 alltime. In 1920, he won 26 games for the Yankees and followed it with 27 in 1921. He is not, however, in the baseball Hall of Fame.

Chapman is buried in Lake View Cemetery in Cleveland, just off Mayfield Road in

Cleveland Heights. I passed it almost every day going to and from work at Notre Dame College. It is a place of pilgrimage for Cleveland baseball fans. Chapman's grave is annually festooned with bats, balls, and gloves attesting to the enduring loyalty of Tribe fans.

Sports can be, at times, a cruel testimony to the hard fact that life goes on. Upon Chapman's death, the Tribe, in need of a shortstop, called up from the New Orleans Pelicans young Joe Sewell. Sewell not only performed superbly while filling in for the martyred Chapman, but went on to have a Hall of Fame career of his own. He still owns the record for the fewest strikeouts per at bat, striking out only once every 73 plate appearances. He also owns the record for the longest consecutive game streak without a strikeout of 115. [4]

In its own way, this is baseball's version of the "dance of death". A famous scene in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* has a sort of conga line of supplicants dancing along a ridge silhouetted in stark black and white as they follow the "Angel of Death" holding his scythe aloft. One member of the line falls off and down the dark incline; the line pauses for a moment, looks down at their fallen comrade; then they resume their dance moving on into the uncertain future certain only of their own inevitable death.

Sewell quickly replacing Chapman, after a decent interval of a day or two, is baseball's version of the "dance of death."

Dancing along, the Tribe rebounded and finished the season strong outlasting and outplacing the second place Chicago White Sox and the fast closing third-place New York Yankees. As Eliot Asinof and Mike Sowell document, the White Sox were trying to live down suspicions of having thrown the 1919 World Series to the Cincinnati Reds in what became known as the Black Sox Scandal. Asinof's Eight Men Out and the film based on it are among the best baseball books and films.

The Black Sox Scandal resulted from the tightfisted policies of White Sox owner Charles Comiskey and the grip he had on players resulting from the reserve clause, which was not overthrown until the 1970s. Without getting into the legal intricacies, the reserve clause was a wickedly simple and ingenious clause in ballplayers' contracts that enabled team owners to reserve rights to use the player for a year after the expiration of their contract. It in effect gave the owner lifetime control of the player, for any contract regardless of length was burdened with the reserved year. As a result, players had no leverage in negotiating contracts. It was quite literally "take it or leave it."

As a result, eight or more members of the 1919 White Sox allegedly conspired with gamblers to throw the series to the Cincinnati Reds. F. Scott Fitzgerald used it in The Great Gatsby with his character Meyer Wolfsheim standing in for Arnold Rothstein, the gangster and gambler who allegedly fixed the series. It resulted in all eight players being acquitted in court of conspiracy to defraud, but baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, nonetheless, suspended them from baseball for life.

Most pathetically among them was former Cleveland Indian "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, arguably one of the greatest hitters in all of baseball history. Jackson, apparently only marginally literate, may have been duped into the scheme, but his performance at bat during the series suggested he was playing to win. He had a series-leading .375 batting average in 1919, threw out five base runners and had no errors in the field. His involvement in the scandal is still a source of great

controversy. A hero to young Americans and one of the most famous ballplayers in the pre-World War I era, Jackson's name became part of American lore as a young fan implored him, as he left the courthouse after the trial, to "Say it ain't so, Joe."

Kenesaw Mountain Landis has also been in the news in 2020. His name on the Most Valuable Player trophy has been stripped away for his role in segregating baseball for most of the early 20th century until Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson integrated it in 1947. Landis, an avowed racist, worked to keep African Americans out of major league baseball. His name has deservedly been erased.

In any event, other events signaled that Cleveland's joy at their victory in 1920 would be short-lived. For in New York, a young right-fielder, who had joined the Yankees in 1920 after Boston Red Sox owner Harry Frazee sold his contract in order to finance his Broadway play No, No Nanette, began to make his mark.

Prior to going to New York, he had been a pitcher who occasionally hit. As a Red Sox pitcher between 1915 to 1919 he went 94-46 with an ERA of 2.278, which is 16th best all-time for all pitchers. He was 11th all-time in winning percentage at .671, 14th all-time in hits allowed per nine innings at 7.17, and set World Series records in 1916 and 1918 for fewest runs allowed and shutout innings. He set a record that stood for 42 years, pitching 29 consecutive scoreless innings in the World Series. [5]

Unfortunately for the rest of the league, he could also hit.

In 1919 with the Boston Red Sox, splitting his time between pitching and right field, he hit 29 home runs, which was the record for a single season.

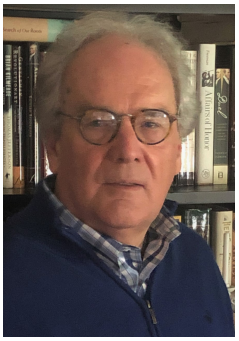
In 1920 in New York playing exclusively in the outfield, he broke that record by July 15 and finished the season with 54 home runs, 158 runs, and 137 runs batted in (RBI's). [6]

His name was George Herman "Babe" Ruth.

And thus began a century of Yankee domination.

But, as Bogie said to Bergman in Casablanca, "We'll always have Paris."

Well, maybe not Paris, but for suffering Tribe fans, we'll always have 1920 when our beloved Indians were champions of the world, or at least the part of it that knows and cares about baseball!



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

End Notes

1. Sowell, Mike. The Pitch That Killed: ***Carl Mays, Ray Chapman and the Pennant Race of 1920.***(New York: Collier Books, 1989), p. 273.
2. *"1920 World Series,"* in **wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920_World_Series#Game_5 accessed October 12, 2020.
3. *"Ray Chapman,"* in **wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available

at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_Chapman accessed October 12, 2020.
4. *"Joe Sewell,"* in **wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Sewell accessed October 12, 2020.
5. *"Babe Ruth The Pitcher,"* at **The Bleacher Report** available at https://bleacherreport.com/articles/232338-babe-ruth-the-pitcher#:~:text=He%20had%20a%20lifetime%20record,some%20point%20in%20their%20career accessed October 12, 2020.
6. "Babe Ruth," in **wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babe_Ruth accessed October 12, 2020.

JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.

In Case You Missed It

Baseball & Poetry It's October and Major League Baseball Playoff Time! written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

The Goosewood A Land Deal that Profoundly Changed Erie's West Bayfront written by prolific writer and researcher **Dr. David Frew**

written by Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education **Rev. Charles Brock**

Helen Schluraff: State's First Female County Commissioner Led by Example as she Broke Barriers written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Judith Lynch**