

BASEBALL AND THE CANADIAN IMAGINATION

George Bowering

WHEN I WAS A STUDENT at the University of British Columbia I got involved in all the arts I could, and for that reason I had a crush on myself, hero of the green room, the newsroom, the muse room, the art gallery, the concert hall, and especially the caf. In the caf you could sit at the special arty-farty table up front, half a scrawled poem in front of you, a mickey of cheap brandy weighing down your benny pocket, cigarette butts spilling over the edge of the gummy ashtray, and impress the newcomers, if you and your friends permitted them a chair. Realizing that there were other aesthetes there, I needed something to mark myself apart from even them. So I would sit with the sports pages in front of me.

“Afgh,” I would mumble, “Drysdale pitches a two-hitter, and *still* he loses.”

They rose to the bait, the actresses, poets, columnists, dancers. They would always pull sour faces and ask me what the hell a poet was doing looking at the baseball scores. I expected them to be naive because they were only college students after all. I had been out in the world, an air force station in Manitoba, mainly.

Baseball is poetry, you coddled future-dilletantes, I would think behind my serene or more likely goofy smile. I had what I wanted, a kind of uniqueness inside the uniqueness. But I also knew that a great number of the writers I admired shared with me a lifelong interest in baseball. You wrote about it once in a while, as William Carlos Williams did, or you wrote about it all the time, as Grantland Rice did. You also read the scores and knew something late at night as you remembered them. I rather believed that if some raglan-clad semi-Brit campus poet did not know anything about baseball, did not like it, in fact, he probably didn't know that much about poetry, either.

Things haven't changed much. Even though the fashion-conscious are leaping on baseball and baseball books in recent years, I still get lots of writers and especially reviewers tut-tutting me for mentioning baseball in everything I write, whether it is a novel about eighteenth-century mariners or a “translation” of Rilke.

I have finished another historical novel recently. It will be published early in

1987, ninety-eight years after the actions it depicts. It has baseball in it. Let me tell you why.

The setting for the novel is the Thompson Valley in 1889 and 1890. While doing my research, one's favourite part of writing a novel, I found that a Kamloops team, fortified with some American players, won the British Columbia baseball tournament in 1889. Even though the villain of the novel is an American who shot a French-Canadian ranch hand near Kamloops, I resisted temptation. Then I found out that New Year's Day of 1890 was preternaturally warm and that the Kamloops team played the CPR team in a game that day, and that the game had to be suspended in the fifth inning because of an eclipse of the sun! What was I supposed to do? Refuse a gift from a muse who has been watching over me since my teen-age days when I reported the doings of the Kamloops baseball team for newspapers in the South Okanagan?

In any case, I don't really feel that I have to defend the appearance of baseball in my poems and fiction. As everyone knows, I have been overly-influenced by American writers, and many of my favourite American writers — Fielding Dawson, Joel Oppenheimer, Tom Clark, Jonathan Williams, Jack Spicer — pepper their writings with references to the diamond game. Even the writers I don't particularly like but always read — Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, etc. — find that they have to pay attention to the great American game, too.

Well, I have always thought that it was the great Canadian game, too. That reflects, in all likelihood, the fact that I was brought up in a part of Canada that was not cold enough for hockey, and too poor for football, games that were popular, I heard from immigrants, on the prairies. Some of my friends got baseball scholarships to U.S. colleges, a few signed minor league baseball contracts, and one left-hander who used to strike me out with a terrifying curve ball went 3-0 against the Yankees after being brought up by Boston late one season while I was toiling in Manitoba, where the people I knew were already sharpening their skates.

So I am not patient with a certain kind of letter I have seen in various newspapers during the recent hullabaloo about the Toronto Blue Jays, the letter from some unknowledgeable malcontent, probably an ex-Brit, who complains about our press leading the excitement about an "imported" Yankee game. Maybe he is the same guy who spent the 1970's trying to keep American poets out of the country. I would direct him to a lovely picture book entitled *Cheering for the Home Team* by William Humber (1983).

Humber points out that in Southern Ontario they were playing baseball a year before the legendary Abner Doubleday was supposed to have invented it down farther south. That was a century and a half ago. It did not take it long to get into the hands of Canadian writers. Humber quotes Nellie McClung, writing about a game in 1882, from *Clearing in the West* (1936) :

The seats from off the wagons were set around the place where the baseball game was played. The ball was a homemade yarn ball, and the bat a barrel stave, sharpened at one end, but it was a lovely game, and everyone got runs.

Humber also quotes this, from Ralph Connor's *The Sky Pilot* (1899):

He evidently regarded the exchange of the profession of baseball for the study of theology as a serious error in judgement, and in this opinion every inning of the game confirmed him.

Several years ago I went through all the Canadian poetry books I could find at home and at the UBC library, collecting poems about baseball by Canadian and other poets, including the Cuban and Japanese ones I had found. There were enough to fill a thick volume, and I thought of trying to interest a publisher in such a thing. A. J. M. Smith told me I should call the book *Cobb Would Have Caught It*, apparently a piece of doggerel he had long favoured. I don't remember the name of its author, probably American, but I wish I did. Even the baseball poems by Canadians would make a nice hefty and representative anthology.

THE FIRST CANADIAN POET to have any appreciable influence on my own work was Raymond Souster, who has published many fine poems (and some light hitters) about the game. We have even seen pictures of Souster in baseball garb (check the last issue of *Combustion*, a special issue of its successor, *Is*, edited and published by Victor Coleman, a well-known basketball fan). Most of Souster's recent books have baseball titles — *Change Up*, *Extra Innings*, etc. — an acknowledgement of his sky-pilot-like regret that he switched lineups.

One of my favourite Souster poems has always been a joyful fancy from the 1950's called "The Opener":

From where I was sitting
it looked like an easy double-play.

But at that precise moment
a sloppy looking freighter
slipped through the Western Gap
with a clothesline of washing
half the length of her deck,

and the runner going into second
took one look at the ship
and yelled: "Hey, look, they got
my old lady's black pants
flying at the masthead."

BASEBALL

And when all the infield
turned around to get a gape,
he made second, stole third,
and scored standing up
the winning run in what otherwise
was one of the cleanest-played openers
in a Toronto ball-park.

Souster has always looked for moments of irrational delight that will ease one's necessary observation of normal mortality. He knows that for baseball aficionados opening day is not only the proof of the end of winter (and should thus be made a Canadian national holiday), but a defiance of the end of things.

George Stanley, a poet who lives in northern British Columbia, and whose poetic is much different from Souster's, understands that defiance. In his book entitled *Opening Day* (1983), the title poem ends this way, saying of "every fist, mouth, mother / and mother-to-be down the first base line":

& I knew they triumphed
not over me, not over my, mine
mind
not over mind
but over darkness, iso-
lation, as the staring
of windows, the eyes of cars
& streetcars
& most of all the Victorians,
crouched in jealous rows on the hills
tall dark rooms we had stayed in
too long
now out in the sun!

Of course not only opening day, but any game at all is surcease from grim reality. But baseball is not all escape; it is not all fantasy or marvel. Dwight Gardiner, a poet from the prairies, who moved first to Montreal and then to Vancouver, in search of minor league ball, has in his latest book, *The New York Book of the Dead & Other Poems* (1984), a serial poem called "Double Header," which, among other things, flicks a note at the condition nearly any fan can glimpse in his own condition:

Max Venables'
single
first news
from Phoenix

the pathetic leagues
 the almost got close
 enough leagues.

But in baseball we can say what we have learned not to say in our lives: wait till next year! Now in the last innings of the nineteen hundreds we have come to realize that there is not much time left for the twentieth century to belong to Canada.

Baseball, however, is not life, except for a few hundred substitute players in the majors and minors. Baseball is postmodernism. It is just about all signifier, very little signified, at least in a metaphorical sense. We know that football is referential as can be — to war, to business, to sex life, to the years filled more and more with injuries and failing health.

In Canada, most of the poets are baseball fans. Even some of the women poets are playing softball and writing baseball poems. Judith Fitzgerald is already at least a chapbook ahead of Marianne Moore. The only two football fans I know among the Canadian poets are Eli Mandel and John Newlove. A moment's reflection will remind you that they are both from Saskatchewan, the province most often associated with novels of grim naturalism.

In Canada, a lot of the poets are also ball players. If the poets were to play a game against the fiction writers, they would win 10-3. In Montreal in the early days of the Expos I played on a team called the York Street Tigers, and we played a double-header every Saturday against the Domtar All-Stars. The All-Stars used to beat us two games out of three, but I think that was because we had so many fiction writers in key positions. On return to Vancouver I joined the Granville Grange Zephyrs (Zeds, it said on our headbands), one of the founding teams of the famous Kosmik League. We were very successful, made up as we were entirely of poets and painters. Now I play for the Bad Backs, an amazingly successful team with poets as its majority. We clean up on the opposition, formed of teams whose rosters are filled with newspaper reporters and booksellers.

CANADA'S BASEBALL-LOVING fiction writers are more famous than its poets, at least for loving baseball. But it has been my experience that they are not as good at playing the great Canadian game, by which I mean, in this context, fastball. In the *Crow Journals* (1980), Robert Kroetsch records this observation, Saturday, July 10, 1976, Qu'Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan:

Hugh Hood here to teach prose writing. He knows by heart all the statistics about baseball and quotes them without provocation. He comes equipped with seven

pairs of expensive sneakers, colors various, many sweat suits and baseball caps and a couple of gloves. We went out to play ball. He can't catch or throw or hit. The novelist as amateur. He'll probably write a great sports novel.

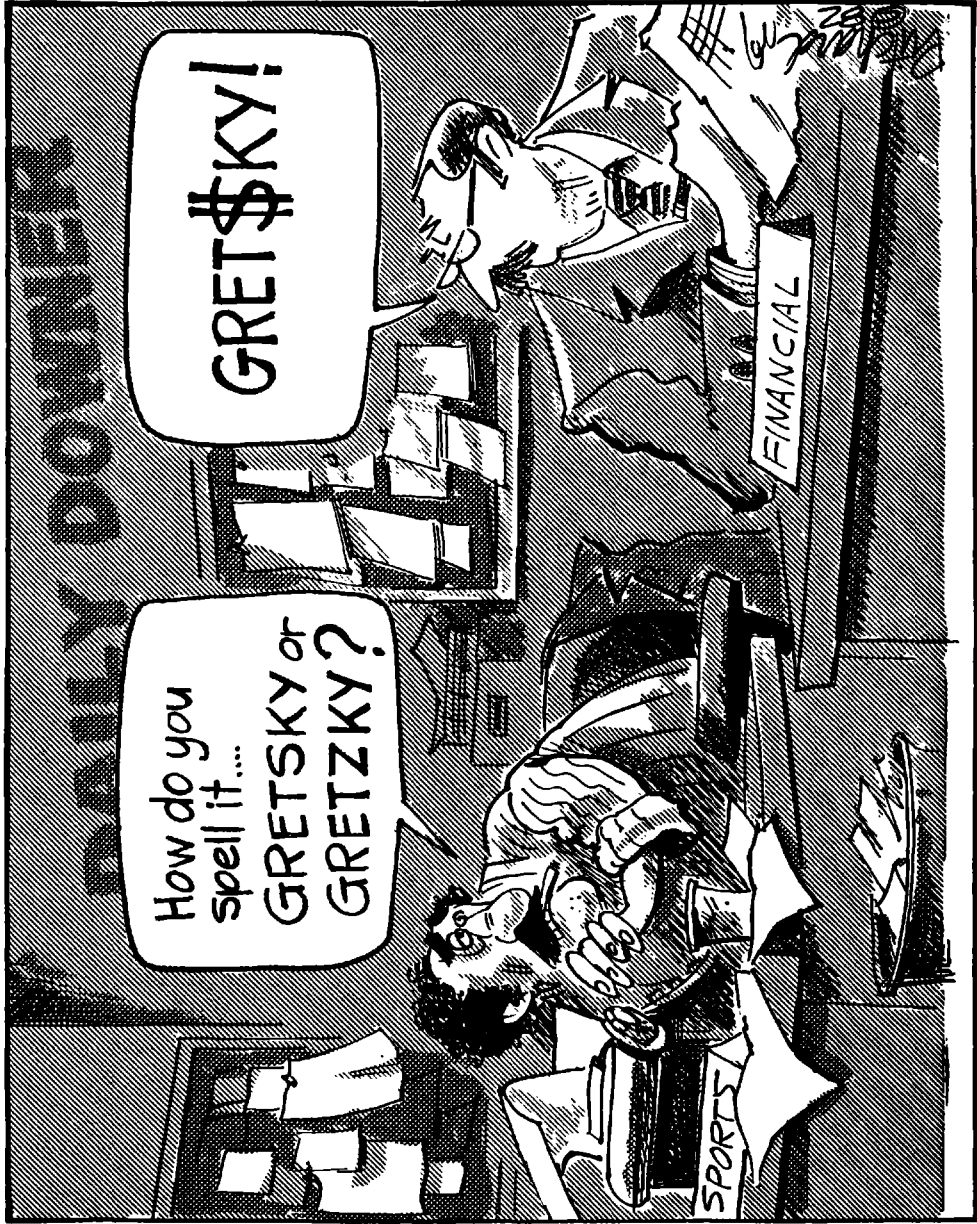
In Montreal, we gave a three-game tryout to Clark Blaise, another writer who can quote baseball statistics at the drop of a popup. We put him at first where a guy who cannot run will do the least harm, but we found out that he could not hit the curve ball. Or the fastball. Or the slowball. When W. P. Kinsella, prize-winning author of *Shoeless Joe* and other baseball fictions, announced that he was moving from Calgary to the west coast, we extended him an invitation to come to our beloved Section 9 for the AAA games at Nat Bailey Stadium, and to the sandlot for a tryout. We have not seen him in either place. Well, we know that he goes to big league parks on his summer rambles, but we wonder what his excuse is for not coming to a Bad Backs practise. Of course Kinsella is also famous for his stories about Indians; and we do not expect him to be good at being an Indian, at least not when we find out that he is not.

Of all the Canadian fiction writers I know, the ablest ball player I have seen is Hanford Woods, and his best-known fiction is a novella that won the Fels Award for the best novella in an American little magazine that year. It has since been published with another long piece of fiction in a book, but its title is *The Drubbing of Nesterenko*. That's right — a hockey story.

A few years ago I edited a book of fiction about sports for Oberon Press, though, and was delighted to find out that Canadian novelists and short story writers seem more interested in baseball than in hockey. Every fall and winter the department store book shops are filled with new hockey books, but they are almost always written by newspaper hacks. Baseball attracts the novelists. Blaise has covered the game for *TV Guide* and other slicks, and so has Kinsella. Mordecai Richler has written with his characteristic high low humour about baseball in and outside his novels.

With few exceptions football does not animate the imaginations of our novelists or poets. Only the reporters try to make the CFL into some kind of national mucilage, and tout the Grey Cup weekend as a national holiday. That says, I think, something about football. Let the Americans have football, says the poet. Canada has not been in a shooting war for over thirty years.

HUGH HOOD HAS WRITTEN two non-fiction books about hockey, and a novel about politics that uses touch football as a motif. He has written more stories with reference to sports than any other Canadian fiction writer, even Morley Callaghan. But in recent years he has referred to baseball more than to any other athletic and aesthetic play. One marvellous story tells of



old Jarry Park fans taking their portable radios there rather than attend the game at the Big Owe, until there are bigger crowds at the phantom game than at the corporeal one. Another relates the dream fiction of a middle-aged man who goes to a major league training camp as a walk-on, and enjoys one magical season as a premier pitcher. In his most recent collection of short stories, *August Nights* (1985), the opening story tells of a woman who listens to Expos games on the radio as she follows the adventures of wild birds around and in her summer place, and the title story relates the giddy activities of a couple of female Expos groupies. That first story, "The Small Birds," has a nice moment that offers a kind of theological, anti-utilitarian defence of baseball. Some swallows have nested under the porch, and by mid-July the miraculous young have grown so large that they are in danger of crowding one or another out of the nest:

On Saturday, 19 July, she was lurking near the nest, thinking she might anticipate some infant attempt at flight, catch the creature if the attempt should go badly. She might retrieve some squeaking Icarus before he hit rock, a basket catch like those the outfielders kept making in National League play as described in the summer-long sequence of Expo broadcasts going on in the swallows' sky. In a bird's mind, the account of the game would seem like the voice of God, superior to the visible order, coming from elsewhere. Something given, a part of pure life.

Those readers familiar with Hood's cycle of novels know that he is interested in the details of earthly life, but that his vision is spiritual, that he sees Wordsworthian spots in time as epiphanic. Referential meaning is converted by a special energy of attention into pure radiated meaning, regard into love. Even when Hood pokes nimble fun at his own religious and literary belief, he means that a most mundane event can hold the news of redemption and grace. It is no wonder (though it is for wonder that he is there) that Hood will be in the grandstand, looking for a perfect game.

Kinsella, too, is after wonder when he looks at baseball, and like Hood, he has an optimistic view of the world. But while Hood is after vision, Kinsella is after magic, the sort of thing Malamud wanted in *The Natural*; and no wonder — Kinsella came up to the majors from the Iowa Workshop. One of Kinsella's stories bears a remarkable likeness to Hood's story about the radio fans in old Jarry Park. In Kinsella's story, "The Thrill of the Grass," the fans take advantage of a baseball strike to sneak into a stadium night after night, gradually replacing the artificial turf with real grass.

Kinsella does tell nifty and dreamy stories about baseball players and especially pure-hearted fans. But one aspect of his prose does not really suit the game. Kinsella loves similes, the easiest of tropes. He seldom lets a thing or event go by without inventing a lush simile. Baseball, though, is not like anything. Similes would work admirably with football.

BASEBALL IS NOT LIKE anything. But it does seem to be various things for writers. For many writers, as for many fans, it is a stadium for the play of memory. Clark Blaise, at the heart of the North American tradition, has always been interested in telling stories about (his) childhood and youth. Nostalgia, and what in lesser places is called trivia, pervade his fictions. What could be more useful, and in view of his upbringing, more natural than a first-person recollection of boyhood fascination with baseball statistics or the (temporary) home team? Here is Richard Durgin, the epistolary narrator of Blaise's *Lusts* (1983):

The first time Pittsburgh became entirely mine was when I walked out of the house one summer Saturday and pieced together the various transfers and street-car routes that would drop me at the Forbes Field parking lot. I was eight. Bliss, when you're eight, is sitting in the bleachers and pitting your knowledge against the beer-swollen platitudes of laid-off steelworkers. The sweetest words in the world come from some hunky downing his Iron City and nodding, "Think so, kid? Yeah, maybe yer right."

Of course he is right. I mean in saying that those are the sweetest words in the world.

(By the way, have you noticed how often the quotations I have made mention Saturday? Do you remember how you felt about Saturday when you were a schoolboy or schoolgirl?)

One of my favourite short stories is a piece called "Losers," by Brian Fawcett, who is also the catcher for the Bad Backs. Fawcett made his reputation as a poet, but in the past four years he has published three books of fiction. I have noticed that since he became a fiction writer his playing skills have diminished. "Losers" is a story about the earlier days of the Kosmik League, and treats the relationships between that (dis)organization and the rest of the Revolution as it altered consciousnesses in the early 1970's. In the Kosmik League it was considered politically incorrect to give way to ambition or to steal against a lefty. Fawcett's story relates the difficulties of a former Little Leaguer who still wants to knock over the second baseman, but who has become socially educated enough to despise aggressive competition.

In the first year the narrator's team has fun, and occasionally a little stylish victory. But

The next season, unfortunately, the team began to win. For me and a few others, it signalled that The Revolution was over, and that our side had lost. Our baseball skills had grown, which meant that we were all now *good* sandlot ball players, and that if we were willing to go to work for the telephone company or something like that, we could be playing Senior B softball. It got to some of us.

BASEBALL

Some of us baseball fans have wondered for a long time how we can admire someone like Ted Williams, who flew U.S. Marine Corps fighters in Korea, and probably voted for Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. But we do admire Ted Williams. He was the Ezra Pound of baseball, an epic maker who would not wear a necktie. In "Losers," Fawcett's narrator says:

But The Revolution was in trouble too, and it was in trouble with baseball for the same reasons it was in trouble with a lot of fairly basic laws of behavioural physics. For one thing, if people practice anything, they'll get better at it— unless, of course, they get bored with it, or become afraid of it, and quit. Skill has its own unique set of demands, one of which is that it breeds ambition.

The trouble with The Revolution is that it thought baseball was like something, or about something. Since the Kosmik League has gone and been replaced by a bunch of older guys who like to play ball with each other, the softball has got to be more fun, and there is no more competition to see who can be more revolutionary. Not on the field, anyway.

There are still those who think that baseball is a "slow" game because players do not bash one another. To them, I suppose, "survival" is still the main theme in the Canadian character. There are still those who think that we will be polluting the Canadian imagination by playing and following the game usually associated with the Imperialistic Power to the south of us. There are probably still those who think that an interest in baseball is frivolous and therefore not in keeping with an essentially puritanical Canadian ethos. One thinks of the scorn directed Lester Pearson's way when it was reported that he watched the World Series in his office when he might have been meeting with his cabinet members. In that instance, Pearson, a one-time ballplayer with skills resembling those of Raymond Souster, was probably receiving the tut-tutting of both puritans and chauvinists (if they are two distinct groups).

But it would be hard to find anyone more recognizably Canadian than Lester Pearson or Raymond Souster. It should not surprise anyone to look into the trunk of a Canadian writer's car and see a ball and a bat, a glove and some turf shoes, perhaps some elastic knee bandages and *Cheering for the Home Team*.

