

Sporting Justice: The Chatham Coloured All-Stars and Black Baseball in Southwestern Ontario, 1915-1958 by Miriam Wright

Jason Beck

Volume 116, Number 1, Spring 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110100ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110100ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Beck, J. (2024). Review of [*Sporting Justice: The Chatham Coloured All-Stars and Black Baseball in Southwestern Ontario, 1915-1958* by Miriam Wright]. *Ontario History*, 116(1), 107–110. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110100ar>

support. Her use of case study to build narrative and argument in this book is most compelling. Iacovetta's presentation of the case files establishes a basis from which she makes important qualitative comparisons. Using case files, Iacovetta showcases the ways in which male and female counselors engage differently with their clientele. She is critical of the narratives present within the files and reads against the grain of the narrative approach and engages in a reading of emotions in the case studies to understand the biases of the caseworkers. She provides a detailed discussions of race, class, and gender in relation to the work done at the Institute and shows how these factors influenced caseworkers reading of certain situations. There were and are inherent biases present in the Institute's practice of pluralism. Iacovetta's presentation of the case files exposes the paradoxes and tensions revealed in well-intentioned actions and highlights the cross-cultural but also cross-racial and cross-class relationships that developed at the Institute and in understandings of pluralism.

As a leader in the immigrant and settlement service field, the International In-

stitute of Metropolitan Toronto engaged in an array of services during the 1950s–1970s. The Institute left behind a contradictory legacy, imbued with divisive decisions on issues of class, race, and gender. However, Iacovetta's study of the Institute's history also gives attention to the role of women in community pluralism and provides an understanding of the long history of pluralism and the roots of liberal ideology and nationalism in late-twentieth-century multiculturalism. Iacovetta's monograph provides a critical yet compassionate discussion of the roles of the Institute and the volunteers and staff who worked there. She moves beyond dichotomy to address the possibilities and limits of "double-edged pluralism" (20) and its complexities. *Before Official Multiculturalism* provides fresh insight into the history and development of multiculturalism in Canada and centres the role of women in doing this work at a community level.

Katelyn Arac

Postdoctoral Researcher, Office of the Associate Vice President, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Wilfrid Laurier University

Sporting Justice

The Chatham Coloured All-Stars and Black Baseball in Southwestern Ontario, 1915-1958

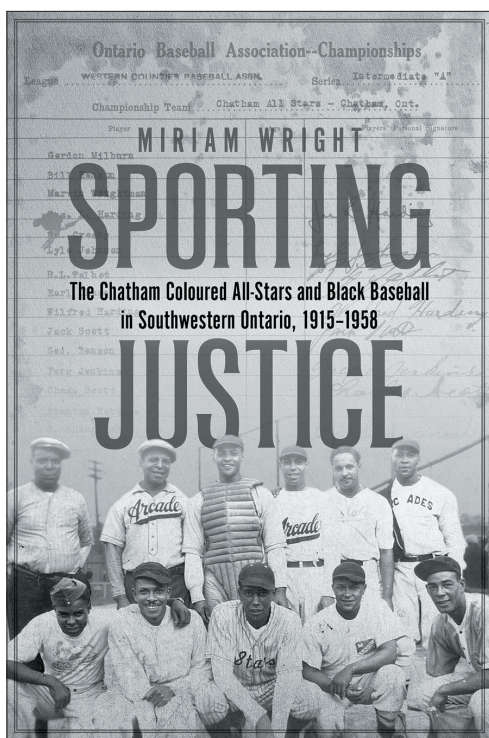
by Miriam Wright

Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2023. 264 pages. \$29.59 softcover. ISBN 9781771125840 (www.wlupress.wlu.ca)

At one point in a public dispute during the 1939 Ontario Baseball Association Intermediate A championship series, Len Harding, catcher and later manager of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, told the press: "All we ask is a fair

break. (137)"

Harding couldn't have known this when he uttered his plea at the time, but with that one simple phrase he also summed up the entire eight-year existence of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars in the



1930s, as well as all Black Canadian baseball teams in southwestern Ontario in the decades before and after them. It's a pivotal quote and defining moment skillfully captured and highlighted by author Miriam Wright, Associate Professor of History at the University of Windsor, in her new book aptly titled *Sporting Justice*.

Harding was referring to the fact Chatham was being forced to travel over 150 miles (over two-and-a-half times farther than their white opponent Meaford) to a neutral site for the deciding game of the provincial championship when more central locations to both towns existed but were ignored. For the working-class All-Stars, travelling that far (and losing wages from time off work) was a significant financial hurdle at a time when low-paying jobs were all most Black Canadians could hope for. It was just one more unfair, likely

racially-motivated burden thrown in the path of a Black Canadian baseball team that faced no shortage of them, whether it was restaurants that refused to serve them, verbally abusive spectators, crooked umpires, or racist depictions of the team in local newspapers.

There are no shortage of other key moments Wright shines the spotlight on in this well-written and engrossing book that chronicles the brief, yet influential rise of the Coloured All-Stars from the only Black team in the mostly White Chatham City Baseball League to the first Black baseball team to win an Ontario provincial championship (Intermediate B) in 1934 to winning the Intermediate A Western Counties Baseball Association championship in 1935.

During Wright's season-by-season account of the Coloured All-Stars she introduces the reader to memorable players like shortstop Earl 'Flat' Chase, whose incredible ability at the plate as a home run hitter was marveled at by teammates, opponents, and sportswriters alike often after crushing another ball out of the park farther than anyone could remember. Or King Terrell, the Coloured All-Stars left-handed third baseman—a rarity in baseball—known for his superb fielding ability, scooping up grounders and curving a sharp throw to first around the pitcher to nab a charging baserunner out.

Sporting Justice brings the Coloured All-Stars to life through Wright's well-rounded use of various sources, supported by many influential scholarly works from the field of Canadian sport history. Particularly insightful are oral history interviews conducted with many former players, supporters, and families in Chatham ensuring their voices are heard front and center.

Wright's analysis of the local newspaper coverage given to the Coloured All-

Stars is especially revealing of explicit and more veiled examples of racism in how the team and individual players were referred to and described compared to language used—or not used—for White teams and players. In fact, one of the more interesting facets of *Sporting Justice* is Wright's illustration of the evolution of the Coloured All-Stars' relationship with the local press. Beginning with stereotypical and even outright racist depictions in print in the team's early seasons, each championship victory raised the All-Stars' profile and garnered respect in the community to the point where in later years team members felt confident enough to use the press to serve their own interests: publicly standing up for themselves, seeking public support, or even pushing back against decisions and actions they deemed unfair or racist.

Even in recent times a commonly-held feeling among many Canadians is that the worst examples of racism did not in the past—and do not currently—exist in Canada. That this was something that afflicted other countries elsewhere but not our own. *Sporting Justice* is another strong work that proves, through the experience of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, many ugly examples of racism did in fact take place here and shouldn't be brushed off the basepaths. "Sundown towns"—communities which required Black people to leave by nightfall—were not uncommon in the team's travels in Ontario. Players were routinely turned away from restaurants and hotels, such as when they played Penetanguishene (and future Major League pitcher Phil Marchildon) in the 1934 provincial final and were forced to stay out-of-town in Midland where they were accepted. For a 1935 game in Strathroy the players arrived to find racist messages scratched in chalk on the sidewalks. Racist insults hurled from the stands by spectators were

common. Fights in the stands and on the field were also a regular occurrence.

These were all things no White team of the era faced. And although the All-Stars often succeeded in spite of it all, earning themselves respect on the diamond, rarely did that fully transfer over to everyday life at that time. As Wright so eloquently summed up, "Playing baseball could never entirely be separated from the world that created it. (81)"

One of the underlying, somber themes which Wright returns to periodically in *Sporting Justice* seems to be that if Black ballplayers had truly been given the 'fair break' Len Harding was pleading for in all situations on the ball diamond and in everyday life—something that most White players enjoyed and took for granted—just how far could teams like the Chatham Coloured All-Stars and star players like Chase and Terrell gone? More championships? Undoubtedly. Careers in the Major Leagues? Quite likely. It's a reminder of how truly impressive the championship results were that these disadvantaged Black teams and athletes achieved in the harsh face of daily racism. In the end everyone ultimately lost out. Pioneering Black Canadian teams and players never truly had the full opportunity to experience their utmost potential, while their families and supporters failed to witness and be inspired by what these great teams and outstanding athletes could have achieved on a truly level playing field.

Even as it was, *Sporting Justice* highlights the influence of the Coloured All-Stars on future generations as significant. In the team's final season in 1940 and then in subsequent years, the Coloured All-Stars were key to the early integration of Chatham's senior amateur teams, with several White players added to their roster that final year and later many of the

Coloured All-Stars joining White teams to great success. After the Second World War, former Coloured All-Stars players were key to the creation and growth of subsequent new Black baseball teams in Chatham, most notably the Taylor Athletic Club of the 1940s and the Panthers of the 1950s. It is no coincidence that the father of Canada's first-ever inductee into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York was himself a key player on the Chatham Coloured All-Stars and no doubt an inspiration to his son, Ferguson Jenkins Jr., the famed pitcher who starred in the Major Leagues for nineteen seasons.

Lasting recognition for this underappreciated team has only arrived in recent years with induction of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars into the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame in 2000 and Canada's Sports

Hall of Fame in 2022. After reading *Sporting Justice*, if there truly is any 'sporting justice' in our country's sports halls of fame, you can't help but think induction into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame must not be far off also. Yet perhaps the most lasting tribute to this remarkable, trailblazing team will remain Miriam Wright's thoroughly researched, stylishly illustrated, and carefully nuanced glimpse into the origins and legacies, hardships and victories of a team of Black Canadian baseball players who loved playing a game and desired only 'a fair break' like anyone else both on the field and in everyday life.

Jason Beck

Curator and Facility Director, British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame

President, Canadian Association for Sport Heritage

Being Neighbours

Cooperative Work and Rural Culture, 1830–1960

by Catharine Anne Wilson

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. 432 pages. \$44.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-2280-1473-7.

Catharine Wilson has written what is bound to become a touchstone in Canadian rural history; you can bet the farm on it. Wilson shows that even if farmers "bet the farm" and lost, most had extensive networks of neighbours on which they could rely for support, which she illustrates well by exploring cooperative work (bees) through an unprecedented study of 112 rural diaries, a project spanning twenty years. Bees were cooperative work events where rural peoples gathered to complete work so demanding it required multiple

hands (and hoofs too!) Barn-raising bees are perhaps the most iconic and required immense mammalian power: sixteen to twenty men and four yoke of oxen (127). Bees were essentially a form of social security; labour provided to one neighbour in need was, in due time, reciprocated. Importantly, though, reciprocity was not immediate, as one cattleman quoted by Wilson notes: 'No, you shouldn't pay back a fellow right away. That would mean that you... looked at it like a commercial deal... If you keep it going fair, it will work out