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Book Reviews

Essay

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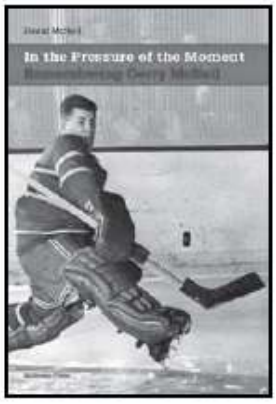

In the Pressure of the Moment: Remembering Gerry McNeil by David McNeil (Vancouver, BC: Midtown Press, 2016, 285 pp., $24.95).

I'm the last person who should review David McNeil's book, not only because I've known him for about thirty years — we both made the transition from Anthony Burgess to 18th-century studies and were on the job market at the same time, he landing at Dalhousie, I at Memorial — but also I'm the least sports inclined person around.

Nonetheless, his memoir brought back a flood of memories of Hockey Night in Canada when I was a kid — back in the good old days when there were only six teams and Foster Hewitt called the shots. My dad, who was a doctor, never had time to watch TV, but our housekeepers, the Culls from Fogo, who lived over the office, crammed the kitchen table with Molson bottles (the good old squat ones) and shouted at the black and white screen every Saturday night. What giants played in those days — the Richard brothers, Jean Beliveau, Doug Harvey — and that unforgettable sound of newly sharpened blades engraving calligraphic lines on hard ice.

The subject of *In the Pressure of the Moment: Remembering Gerry McNeil*, is the author's father, who tended goal (1943-1960), most memorably for the Montreal Canadiens during their unbeatable streak from 1950 to 1954. Born in Quebec, Gerry McNeil (1926-2004) signed up with the Canadiens at the age of 17. On 16 April 1953 he blocked every shot on net from the Boston Bruins in the fifth and deciding game of the Stanley Cup Final. Elmer Lach scored the first and only goal of the game for the Habs in

overtime to win the Stanley Cup. The next day McNeil had something else to celebrate: his 27th birthday. This was the first Stanley Cup Final to be broadcast by CBC TV. Anticipating one of the first Trudeau's policies, this athlete (with French ancestry on his mother's side and Scots on his father's) was perfectly bilingual. If he had a truncated education, he had uncanny physical prowess combined with razor-sharp responses.

The cover photograph is telling: a man whose entire focus is on trying to redirect the flight path of a hefty black orb of India rubber to anywhere but behind the line. Legs splayed, goalie stick parallel to his right leg. The pads could reupholster a Lincoln Continental. Protection for legs and arms, but nothing for the head. Brain was outruled by brawn. McNeil's fellow goalie, Jacques Plante, finally broke the macho mould, overcoming objections from his coach, Toe Blake, and the crowd by donning the first goaltender mask in 1959.

Goalies have the worst job in the league. If the team wins, it's because of the forwards; if it loses, it's the goalies' fault. In the words of David McNeil, his father occupied "hockey's loneliest of positions." One failure to stop a puck can instantly wipe out the memory of a thousand saves. In the 1951 Final, McNeil stopped 41 shots on goal, but the one that got through in overtime off the stick of Bill Barilko was captured famously in a photograph taken by Nat Turofsky. Chagrin doesn't begin to cover how McNeil must have felt every time he was reminded of the one that slipped past, yet he took defeat in stride, telling his son with humbling candour, "you didn't always win when you played your best." What helped to mitigate the anguish was the birth of his daughter Karen on the same day.

McNeil had to face the blistering slap-shots developed by Boom Boom Geoffrion in practice and later by Bobby Hull as an opponent. His trick was to get closer to the shooter to cut down the angle of the shot. He had more respect for quick passing and a good deek-out than head-on brute force. In two games marking his "brilliant comeback" the only goal out of 56 shots resulted from his own team members backing into the net.

The inquisitive son asked his famous father if he regretted retiring for a spell in 1954 as the Habs were on the brink of winning five straight Stanley Cups, but then the author might not have been born. Referring to one's father in an extended and multi-layered narrative can be a tricky business: the author alternates between first name, last name, and nicknames "Mac" or "Maxi" as the context requires.

It's a great story both off and on the ice that needed to be told. It took a lot of guts to confess to your readers that your dad had a violent fight with your brother at a time when coming out of the closet was virtually unheard of and largely suppressed, especially in a hockey player's family.

To his credit, Gerry McNeil came to accept his son's homosexuality.

One mark of a true champion is how opponents regard you, and McNeil earned the respect of opponents and reporters alike. Fame took its toll on one of the greatest goalies the sport has ever seen. "Officially, my father was part of the Stanley Cup-winning team of 1956-57, but his face in the team photo tells the real story. His expression is older, more serious, and almost cynical — nothing like the smiling youth of '53" (p. 209).

Abundantly footnoted, with an extensive bibliography listing newspapers, magazines, internet and print sources, even Jane Siberry's Hockey song (but not Stompin' Tom's), McNeil merges his memoir to his father with his scholarly agility. I suspect the author kept a scrapbook bulging with clippings. Clearly McNeil is fascinated by all aspects of the sport, from on-ice experience, to stadium design, to theoretical, literary and dramatic ponderings by Hubert Aquin, Roland Barthes, Tomson Highway, Benoit Melançon, Mordecai Richler, Rick Salutin … come to think of it, I reviewed his play, *Les Canadiens*, when it was performed in Ottawa in 1979, so perhaps I'm not as unqualified to review sports literature as I thought.

The author may admit in conversation that I was the first to point out to him that his father had been immortalized in Wayne Johnston's 1990 novel, The Divine Ryans, which merged the story of a dead father with themes of conflicted sexuality and hockey, particularly that historic moment in the Montreal Forum in Game 5 of the 1953 Final when the puck ricocheted off Gerry McNeil's goalie stick into the crowd in one of the most phenomenal shutouts ever. This puck figures as a memento from a missing year in the father's life:

> On a piece of paper taped to one side of the puck, these words were written: "Deflected into the stands by Canadiens goalie Gerry MacNeil [sic] at 1:03 of overtime. Caught by Donald Ryan. Nineteen seconds later, Elmer Lach scored to win the Stanley Cup for Montreal. Montreal Forum, April 16, 1953." How I envied my father. I'd have given anything to be there when the Habs won the Cup. (p. 74)

Later, the son Draper Doyle Ryan, pores over a photograph of McNeil about to throw his stick into the air in that moment of victory, hoping to find his father in the background. Johnston claims the photograph actually existed, but David McNeil, after making a *Maltese Falcon*-like search, came up empty-handed. Will this elusive image ever be found? Johnston's novel was made into a film in 1999 starring Bob Joy. My wife was in it too, but that's another story.

McNeil's memoir also contains more than thirty black-and-white photographs from team gatherings to family moments. Midtown Press of Vancouver is to be praised for publishing this finely written biography of an overlooked champion in the history of Canadian sport and for donating a dollar from the sale of each copy to KidSport/Sport Jeunesse.