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Jimmy Collins: A Baseball Biography by Charlie Bevis
(review)

Ron Kates

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are reasons to laugh with, and at, the absurdity of grown men with painted stomachs. Somewhere along the line, the Yankees became synonymous with Steinbrenner, with the hyperreality of excess, with the money and power and win-at-all-costs attitude, rather than with the people who fill the cheap seats. Leitch reminds the reader that it isn't that simple.

Rob Fleder brings his years of editorial experience with *Sports Illustrated* to bear in *Damn Yankees* as he weaves the varied submissions into a narrative that evokes the entire emotional spectrum. The humorous tone is often supplanted by the sonorous facts of life: the passing of legends, the fears of uncertain times, the mistakes that yield friendships. There will always be new ways for people to find fault with the Yankees or with the inequitable system that has, at times, seemed to favor the large-market teams. There will always be something to be said about a city, a team, or a player with which people will take issue. Ultimately, this is where Fleder's collection is most successful. Worthwhile reading for any fan, *Damn Yankees* succeeds in finding the ground between a celebration and a critique, all the while making accessible the bright lights, the big city, and the stories behind the pinstripes.



Charlie Bevis. *Jimmy Collins: A Baseball Biography*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2012. 238 pp. Paper, \$29.95.

Ron Kates

In the wake of Ron Santo's passing, Bill James offered a spirited endorsement for the Cubs third baseman's inclusion in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Among other arguments, James posited that Santo's offensive and defensive statistics outshone a number of already-inducted third basemen, specifically, and ballplayers in general. James and other baseball writers often single out turn-of-the-century star Jimmy Collins as a prime example of a player—a third baseman to boot—whose reputation outshone his actual accomplishments, leading critics to emphasize Santo's merit in competition. In his biography of Collins, Charlie Bevis documents not just Collins's playing career, but also his business acumen, devoting a good portion of the book to discussing how Collins negotiated contracts to his favor, then invested heavily in real estate throughout his hometown of Buffalo, New York. Despite some redundancy in emphasizing Collins's success off the field, Bevis presents a certain divergence from the typical trajectory of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century

star player: rises out of obscurity/poverty, overcomes early struggles, becomes a regular or a star, then (often) has an inability to integrate into life outside of baseball once his playing career is finally done.

As Bevis notes, James “named Collins as the third baseman on his All-Why-Did-They-Elect-Him Team” in *The Politics of Glory* (1994). Bevis concurs in his conclusion that while “every third baseman that the BBWAA elected to the Hall of Fame since Collins’s enshrinement in Cooperstown in 1945 is a legitimate choice as a better third baseman than Collins,” he was “the best third baseman for the entire Deadball Era and even the entire first century of professional baseball” (219). Earlier in the text, however, Bevis recounts the circumstances surrounding Collins’s first professional appearance at the hot corner, a “legend . . . [that] like so many ball legends, grew over time” to eventually “bear only a partial resemblance to the 1895 facts” (33). Having been loaned by his Boston club to the last-place Louisville team, right fielder Collins assumed the hot corner following third baseman Walt Preston’s four errors in five innings. The opponents, the mighty Baltimore Orioles, in the midst of a championship three-peat, purportedly laid down four bunts aimed at Collins, only to see Collins throw out all four bunters, including Hall of Famers Willie Keeler and John McGraw. Never mind that the game’s box score shows only one assist for Collins or that “he didn’t play third base again for another two weeks” (34), the legend began, as Bevis notes, “to bend from fact into fiction” (69). Another Oriole Hall of Famer, shortstop Hughie Jennings, recollected in a 1926 interview that the Orioles kept their promise to Collins that they “would not pull any balls down the third base line and that [they] would not bunt on him,” and that Collins’s mythic fielding demonstration occurred several weeks later in Louisville when “three men bunted in succession, and Collins threw out each man” (35). The legend persevered beyond Collins’s respectable career to the point where “Collins’ name regularly surfaced as the third baseman picked for the various all-time teams selected by famous ballplayers and sportswriters,” including Ty Cobb, Connie Mack, Honus Wagner, Babe Ruth, and Grantland Rice (204). In exploring the role adulterated “facts” play in establishing Collins’s reputation as a stellar fielder and all-around player, Bevis offers a vision of how such reputation-building trumped statistics when Deadball era players were considered for Cooperstown enshrinement. Indeed, several other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hall of Famers make James’s list based largely on reputation, most specifically Joe Tinker, Johnny Evers, and Frank Chance, all lionized in Franklin Pierce Adams’s poem “Baseball’s Sad Lexicon.”

Bevis also devotes a significant portion of his narrative to Collins’s role in working with American League president Ban Johnson to establish the league’s Boston entry, now known as the Red Sox, offering a window to the machina-

tions that resulted in baseball becoming a bi-league sport. Despite leading the Red Sox to victory in the inaugural World Series in 1903 and to a pennant the following year, Collins's fame diminished in Boston shortly after taking control of the franchise. Indeed, Bevis notes, "over a two-year span, Collins plummeted from revered hero who led a veteran team to a second consecutive pennant to a reviled bum who deserted an aging last-place team" (152). Following the inglorious end of his Boston tenure, Collins then joined Connie Mack's A's for one and a half seasons followed by three mediocre minor-league seasons. By the time the Red Sox reascended as a baseball powerhouse in the 1910s, "the 1903 World Series title was a distant memory, and Jimmy Collins was just another old ballplayer" (192).

Having emphasized Collins's business and real estate acumen in the chapters covering his playing career, Bevis devotes two chapters to detailing the player's post-baseball life, including the loss of his real estate investments in the 1929 stock market crash, an event that resulted in his eventually having to move in with his daughter and her family, and Collins's role as "evangelist for municipal ball" in Buffalo (205). Following a chapter covering the successful campaign by a Buffalo newspaperman to induct Collins into the Hall of Fame, Bevis concludes by considering Collins's "legacy to Baseball" (213). Rather than ending with a statistical defense of Collins as a Hall of Famer, Bevis links Collins's "entrepreneurship" and "operational fortitude" to the building of Fenway Park as well as the enduring success of the Red Sox franchise, declaring that "Jimmy Collins truly is the patron saint of Red Sox Nation" (220–21).

Much the same argument—that of the player as spirit or "patron saint" of a ball club—appeared in contemporary support of Santo's Hall of Fame bid, leading one to wonder whether Jimmy Collins would have operated differently—and perhaps even more successfully—in baseball's media-saturated twenty-first century. That Bevis's book leads a reader to ponder such associations indicates the quality of its research and argument.



L. M. Sutter. *Arlie Latham: A Baseball Biography of the Freshest Man on Earth*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2012. 280 pp. Paper, \$29.95.

Charlie Bevis

L. M. Sutter's exploration of the life of nineteenth-century baseball player Arlie Latham is not your stereotypical baseball biography that is peppered