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*Deacon Bill McKechnie: A Baseball Biography* by Mitchell  
Conrad Stinson (review)

Cliff Hight

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cation of the infamous reserve clause in player contracts. Thus, the Federal League challenge stands as the final and pivotal event in the “developmental” phase of professional baseball history, the vital step to establishing a profoundly stable structural form. That form, in turn, served as the essential model followed by all other major professional team sports in the United States, and it remained firmly in place until the arrival of a genuinely forceful players’ union in the 1970s.

At the book’s conclusion, when considering how things might plausibly have turned out differently, Levitt puts the exhaustive details and diverting anecdotes into perspective and pulls his many-layered construction together. The case presented is highly persuasive that the Federal League challenge, though largely forgotten, was indeed not only a lively chapter in baseball’s history, but one with deep and lasting importance. For the serious student of the development of the organizational framework of baseball as a business, Levitt’s work should be required reading.



**Mitchell Conrad Stinson. *Deacon Bill McKechnie: A Baseball Biography*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2012. 238 pp. Paper, \$29.95.**

*Cliff Hight*

Mitchell Conrad Stinson’s second book with McFarland, *Deacon Bill McKechnie: A Baseball Biography*, is a full-length biography of a man who spent nearly fifty years in professional baseball as a player, manager, and coach. Best known for his managerial success and kindly way, Bill McKechnie piloted five clubs in three major leagues, winning four pennants with three of them. The Hall of Famer and two-time World Series winner was the first manager to take three franchises to the Fall Classic. Despite occasional and brief tangents, Stinson’s informative profile is a foundational resource for understanding McKechnie’s baseball career.

An award-winning sportswriter in Evansville, Indiana, Stinson has followed up his 2010 profile of Edd Roush with a book that is what the subtitle suggests: a baseball biography. While interviews with and records from McKechnie’s only living child enhance Stinson’s brief recounting of family history and add insight to the Deacon’s early years and life off the field, the bulk of the text focuses on McKechnie’s life between the chalk lines and in the dugout. This new biography shows McKechnie in his best light: a sagacious manager

with uncanny abilities to get the most out of his pitchers and to have solid defensive teams.

William Boyd McKechnie, son of Scottish immigrants, was born in 1886 in Wilkinsburg, outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He embraced baseball at a young age, starting his professional career in 1905 with an independent team north of Pittsburgh. For fifteen of the next sixteen years, McKechnie played major- and minor-league baseball with eleven franchises. His managerial career included six major- and minor-league teams in twenty-six seasons, including one year as a player/manager. Include his eight seasons as a coach with four major-league teams, and McKechnie worked with sixteen different franchises during his forty-six years in organized baseball.

As a player, he was a versatile, switch-hitting infielder with a good glove and a weak bat. McKechnie bounced between teams for much of his career, and perhaps these peregrinations taught him insights about ballplayers' thinking that later improved his managerial skills. He also learned finer points of the game from men like Honus Wagner, a fellow Pirate infielder, friend, and mentor. Ultimately, as Stinson says, "McKechnie proved ordinary as a player, and that part of his life ended about the time Babe Ruth gave up pitching for swinging lumber. As a manager he was sublime—one of the greatest ever" (4).

He is most often remembered as the Cincinnati Reds manager from 1938 to 1946, where he won the 1939 National League pennant and the 1940 World Series. It was his final managerial stop after piloting National League (NL) teams in Boston, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh as well as an earlier stint with Newark of the Federal League. His only place without an overall winning record was woeful Boston, and even there he exceeded most people's expectations. Further, he won the 1925 World Series with Pittsburgh, and he won NL pennants with St. Louis in 1928 and Cincinnati in 1939.

When considering McKechnie's career, what stands out is its sheer breadth. He entered the game when stars included Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson, and Joe Tinker. He strategized against managers like Leo Durocher, John McGraw, and Wilbert Robinson. And when he retired, the big-name players included Mickey Mantle, Stan Musial, and Jackie Robinson. In the intervening decades, McKechnie had accompanied the game's evolution from dead ball to lively ball, through baseball wars and world wars, and from segregation to integration.

In retelling McKechnie's life, Stinson uses typical sources like team histories, baseball biographies and autobiographies, and materials at the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Contemporary sources include national and local newspapers, and his most unique information comes from his efforts to interview those who remembered McKechnie. That group's MVP is Carol McKechnie.

nie Montgomery, who published her memoir, *The Deacon's Daughter*, in 2011. Beyond sharing her book with Stinson, she adds information that paints a fuller portrait of Bill McKechnie.

A good example of Stinson's efforts to show McKechnie's personal side is his use of an interaction between Beryl Bien—McKechnie's future wife—and the Deacon: "The first time Beryl Bien spoke to him, he got so flustered that he swallowed his chewing tobacco" (39–40). Knowing that McKechnie was so rattled in such an exchange personalizes him with readers.

Further, Stinson effectively describes games and seasons in an understandable manner that maintains the reader's interest, occasionally adding nuggets of detail that enrich the final product. When he describes spring training in 1946, he includes the flattering experience of fourteen-year-old Carol being on the beach when one Reds prospect asked her to the movies. In response, "Deacon Bill issued a wide-ranging edict: His daughter could NOT date ball players—ever" (193).

Stinson's writing is sometimes limited when connecting McKechnie and baseball to contemporary national and world events. Although the effort is understandable, at times it feels forced and unnatural, like when he mentions the radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* after the 1938 season (170–71).

Another story that Stinson relates—that of the aged McKechnie handling an attempted home robbery—is too foreboding. Using phrases like "Deacon Bill was shown no mercy" (6) and "If only McKechnie had just handed over his valuables" (211), Stinson leads the reader to assume the worst. As it turns out, McKechnie effectively defended himself with no mentioned injuries, even returning with a shotgun to an empty room because the two robbers had fled.

Nonetheless, with his biography of Deacon Bill McKechnie, Stinson has attempted to repeat his efforts with Edd Roush: to pull from baseball obscurity a giant of the past and make him relevant today. It appears that Stinson has been successful, reminding readers that occasionally good guys actually finish first. As Reds pitcher Paul Derringer memorialized, "In a sentence I'd say he was the greatest manager I ever played for, the greatest manager I ever played against, and the greatest man I ever knew" (212).

