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Arlie Latham: A Baseball Biography of the Freshest Man on Earth by L. M. Sutter (review)

Charlie Bevis

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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

with scores and play-by-play details of games long forgotten. Rather, this biography is a refreshing look at the personality, escapades, and foibles of a man who happened to play baseball for a living.

Latham's 1,629-game major-league career spanned two decades, from 1880 to 1899 (supplemented by four appearances in 1909). His public persona extended five more decades through the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in a celebrated 1951 photograph of fourteen ballplayers snapped at Toots Shor's restaurant in New York City. In the photo, the ninety-one-year-old Latham was conspicuously out of place among the thirteen Hall of Fame players, with his leg jokingly "kicked up in the air like a Rockette's" and a smirk on his face as if he had "just launched into a ribald song" (9).

After apprenticing with several professional teams in his native New England, Latham made his major-league debut with Buffalo of the National League in 1880, where he took his first steps toward being "baseball's neediest clown, a man who would spend his life in hot pursuit of a crowd's adulation" (21). After a few more stops among the era's many independent professional teams, Latham returned to the major leagues in 1883, where he launched his journeyman career as a third baseman for seven seasons with the St. Louis Browns of the American Association. As Sutter recounts in detail, Latham not only had his ups and downs in baseball by both entertaining and battling with team owners, opponents, and teammates, but he also had a colorful life off the baseball field, where he was an inveterate gambler, spendthrift, womanizer, and alleged wife beater.

Latham was best known for his clowning antics on the coaching lines, where he used his acerbic tongue to pester both the opposition and the umpire to gain an edge for the Browns, who finished in first place for four consecutive years (1885–1888), partly as a consequence of Latham's badgering. While it was his "vocal coaching style that thrust him into the limelight" of baseball, Latham also literally spoke under the stage lights for several winters in the baseball off-season (33). In 1888, he first appeared on stage in the vaudeville production *Fashions*, where he sang the song "The Freshest Man on Earth" (also his on-field nickname, hence the subtitle of the book). Sutter's writing about the intersection of baseball and theater is one of the strongest portions of this biography.

After retiring from baseball after playing several years for Cincinnati in the 1890s, Latham became an umpire and then a coach for John McGraw's New York Giants. Unfortunately, his tongue, "as it was wont to do, began to get the best of him," so McGraw had to let him go (203). During World War I, Latham served as a baseball ambassador in England, where, with his tongue finally more under control, he diplomatically chatted in public with King George V.

In the book's preface, Sutter notes that she "tried to paint a picture of the cities and decades in which Arlie lived" (1). As she did in her two earlier books, *Ball, Bat and Bitumen: A History of Coalfield Baseball in the Appalachian South* and *New Mexico Baseball: Miners, Outlaws, Indians and Isotopes, 1880 to the Present*, Sutter provides plenty of social context for the reader to place Latham's "inimitable gall, brazen cheek and ready wit" (71). For example, it was no wonder that Latham went adrift with his bad habits in St. Louis, as Sutter depicts a wanton city where "the list of saloons was endless," and there were so many brothels that the city was compelled "to legalize prostitution so as to regulate it" (26–27).

This is a well-researched biography, as Sutter mined the digital archives of the *Sporting News* and *Sporting Life* baseball publications as well as other newspapers to ferret out details of Latham's non-baseball life, providing not only evidence but zest to her examination of the man's personality. Sutter, though, periodically lapses into having the research tell the story through the extensive use of block quotations that can overwhelm the reader.

By not focusing only on Latham's positive persona as "the biggest entertainer in baseball," Sutter avoids descent into a hagiographical account of his life (211). Instead, Sutter provides a balanced look at both the good and bad aspects of the man who was "beloved one minute, a goat the next" (198). However, she writes in the preface that "it is not my job to decide for the reader whether he was ultimately a good man or a bad one" (2–3). Readers may be disappointed that Sutter is not more demonstrative in siding one way or the other on an overall evaluation of Latham's life. Readers benefit from biographers who see their role as interpreting the research evidence in a quest for truth, which in his seminal work *How to Do Biography: A Primer* biographer Nigel Hamilton calls "the wellspring of the biographical endeavor" (111). Even the writer of a Rogerian argument, which is predisposed to a balanced look at both sides of an issue, eventually reaches a common ground and develops a proposed outlook that inevitably leans to one side or the other.

On the whole, Sutter makes a valuable contribution to baseball biography with this exploration of Latham. In a subgenre dominated by biographical subjects who are enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame, Sutter's work demonstrates that biographies of baseball's lesser-known but eminently intriguing characters can add much to our understanding of how the sport has affected American culture.