My Thirty Years in Baseball


Reviewed by Kent M. Krause, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The past few years have seen an increasing interest in the reminiscences of baseball legends. Albert Spalding, Babe Ruth, Satchel Paige, Christy Mathewson, Ty Cobb, and Roy Campanella have all recently had their memoirs reprinted by the University of Nebraska Press. Longtime New York Giants’ Manager John J. McGraw is the latest addition to this Hall of Fame lineup. My Thirty Years in Baseball, originally a series of syndicated newspaper articles, was first published in 1923. This 1995 Bison Book edition adds an introduction by McGraw’s biographer, Charles C. Alexander, and an index. Although Alexander believes that these reminiscences were authored by a ghostwriter—either John Wheeler or Stoney McLinn—McGraw still appears to have had a meaningful role in determining the content of this book.

As a player and manager, McGraw was one of early baseball’s most significant personalities. A star with the famed Baltimore Orioles of the 1890s, he finished his playing days with a .334 lifetime batting average. As a big-league skipper from 1899 to 1932, McGraw’s record totaled 2,840 victories with a .589 winning percentage. In these memoirs, he provides a wealth of interesting information about baseball in the “deadball era,” including a description of his innovations with the hit and run, the cutoff play, the sacrifice bunt, and base stealing.

McGraw was a master of these tactics, and his insight into the scientific style of baseball is perhaps the most useful aspect of My Thirty Years in Baseball. When the home run revolution was overtaking the game in the early 1920s, McGraw recalled how base running was formerly the vital component for victory. Although he was eventually forced to acquire power hitters in order to compete in the “Age of Ruth,” McGraw never liked the new style: “I think the game far more interesting when the art of making scores lies in the scientific work on the bases” (p. 207).

McGraw further described that teamwork, mental training, and a fighting spirit were key elements for success in baseball. In discussing the importance of discipline, McGraw related how he once fined Sammy Strang for hitting a game-winning home run because the player had been ordered to bunt. Well aware of his reputation, McGraw also included several
anecdotes describing the fun he had antagonizing umpires and the opposing team’s players and fans. Not surprisingly, however, he avoided reporting the nastier, more violent incidents that marred his career.

McGraw asserted that he wrote this book without using notes, relying instead upon his superior memory. He should have used notes. For example, McGraw recalled that he and his Baltimore Oriole teammates were so motivated by their postseason defeat in 1894 that they conscientiously trained to gain another shot at the Temple Cup. He continued by describing how the well-conditioned Orioles then repeated as pennant winners, easily defeating the Boston Beaneaters in the 1895 Temple Cup series. This is an inspiring story, ruined only by the fact that the Cleveland Spiders actually won the 1895 Temple Cup, defeating the Orioles four games to one.

McGraw’s selective memory also served to exaggerate his own personal achievements. For example, he claimed that his seventy-seven stolen bases in 1895 established a record (based on number of chances) that has yet to be broken. McGraw, however, stole only sixty-one bases in 1895. This number is even less impressive considering that prior to 1898, many instances of aggressive base running, such as scoring from second on a single, were counted as a stolen base.

In discussing his managerial career, McGraw gives the impression that his teams’ losses were never caused by his mistakes. He was adamant that the Giants lost the 1908 pennant because of an unjust decision by an umpire and the league president. McGraw also pointed out that Frank Baker’s critical home runs against the Giants in the 1911 World Series were hit off pitches that had been delivered against his orders. In contrast, McGraw did not report instances where his own blunders proved costly for his team.

The manager was also silent about the accusations that the Giants tried to bribe umpires and opposing players late in the 1908 season. McGraw did write that the idea of fixed games was sickening, declaring that “gambling is the one thing that will always ruin baseball if given half a chance” (p. 113). This proclamation appears hypocritical given McGraw’s 1919 decision to sign the notorious game-fixer, Hal Chase. In addition, McGraw did not mention his long friendship with gambling king Arnold Rothstein, a key participant in the 1919 World Series fix. Clearly, McGraw was not as pure as he hoped to appear in this book.

In his final chapter, the manager seems the sycophant when he discussed the new commissioner, Kenesaw Mountain Landis. McGraw vigorously extolled the virtues of the Judge, concluding the book with “I am convinced that the greatest constructive baseball move of recent years was the placing of authority in the hands of a commissioner—and making Judge Kenesaw M. Landis that commissioner” (p. 265). McGraw’s sincerity is questionable, considering that Landis had previously pressured the manager into divesting himself of his Cuban racetrack and vetoed a trade that