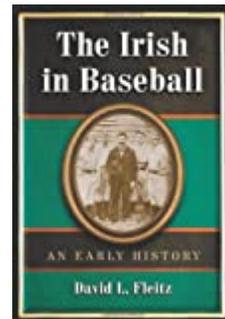




David L. Fleitz. *The Irish in Baseball: An Early History.* Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2009. 200 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-3419-0.



Reviewed by Jerrold Casway

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Commissioned by Michael De Nie (University of West Georgia)

An Unfinished History

David Fleitz's *The Irish in Baseball: An Early History* is a timely book that needed to be written. Baseball has always been a cultural and ethnic barometer of American society. Examining the role of Irish American players in the "emerald age of baseball" is a step in the right direction for understanding the game's evolution and character. The author of other books on nineteenth-century baseball, Fleitz is a credible chronicler of the pre-modern sport. However, there is a difference in tracing an ethnic group through baseball's early history and explaining the reasons for their impact on, and fascination with, the American pastime.

From the beginning of the narrative the author reminds us of who was Irish, or part Irish, among baseball's significant participants. He traces the well-covered field of nineteenth-century baseball history and reminds us of the many winning managers and players of Irish ancestry. Not much new is gleaned by this discussion of straight baseball history or the citing of players' ethnicity. Too many questions needed Fleitz's attention. Why were the Irish drawn to baseball? What sporting advan-

tages did they have over other ethnic groups? How did postbellum urban living contribute to the Irish American sporting experience? What were the actual contributions of Irish American players? Successful ballplayers and managers by themselves do not tell the full story of the Irish in baseball. Winning teams and prosperous franchises led by Charles Comiskey, Ned Hanlon, John McGraw, and Connie Mack had an ethos and character that circulated through baseball's veins. What was it that moved New York manager Bill Joyce to say, "Give me a good Irish infield and I will show you a good team?" (p. ??). Reciting the names of players and their statistics does not tell the story behind this comment.

Another oversight was the lack of reference to the latest and most detailed study of the Irish in baseball, *Ed Delahanty in the Emerald Age of Baseball* (2004). The author's only recognition of this study was indirect. Quoting from an Irish baseball topic in the University of Notre Dame's *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (1999), Fleitz cites the article, but unlike his other footnotes, does not indicate the author. Since the reviewer is the author

of these works, the question is, why does Fleitz not acknowledge these studies?

The book also required better editing. There are many repetitious statements and errors that need not have been made. Some players, such as John Clarkson, Sliver Flint, and Jesse Burkett, went from full Irish to half Irish in a matter of a few pages. Other players were mislabeled as Jewish or "honorary Irish." The 1893 change-pitching distance was five, not ten, feet and Comiskey did not immediately replace Ted Sullivan as manager of the Brown Stockings. Neither did the author always properly cite quotations. Often he used secondary sources when primary and contemporary quotations were appro-

priate. Distinctions also were not made between famine and post-famine refugees and little is said about the contributions of two influential Irish men, Ted Sullivan and Bill McGunnigle. Attention to the actual relationship between the aforementioned Sullivan and Comiskey would have contributed greatly to this ethnic story.

David Fleitz's efforts are noteworthy, but they are flawed by the book's omissions and correctable errors. His topic is too important to overlook its sociological underpinnings. He may have opened the door to a significant field of study, but he never provides his readers with a chance to appreciate the furnishings.

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