
Tris Speaker, the longtime outfielder for the Boston Red Sox and Cleveland Indians, is a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame. There are many reasons why the selection committee chose him in 1937, the second round of five choices for what would be the opening class of fifteen when the Hall opened in June of 1939. Speaker finished with a career .345 batting average, changed the way centerfielders approached their craft, and was especially adept at hitting doubles, often leading the American League. Yet Speaker, the “Gray Eagle,” always seemed to live in the shadows of baseball’s more flamboyant or newsworthy stars—Ruth, Cobb, Gehrig. Now two biographies have appeared to restore Speaker’s place in the baseball pantheon. The first, under review here, is Timothy M. Gay’s treatment, subtitled “The Rough-and-Tumble Life of a Baseball Legend.” In the near future, Charles Alexander, whose biographies of John McGraw, Ty Cobb, and Rogers Hornsby have set the standard for thoughtful academic baseball biographies, will weigh in with his own rendition.

For several reasons, I am predisposed to positive thoughts about Speaker. My grandfather, a pretty fair country ballplayer in southern Ohio during Speaker’s time, idolized him and remained a lifelong Cleveland Indians fan. Family and friends in the Cleveland area have all caused me to have something of a soft spot for the Tribe. But as an historian, I have to be more circumspect and toss nostalgia aside.

Gay’s biography joins a spate of recent books on Deadball and 1920s players such as Harry Hooper, Joe Jackson, Christy Mathewson, and Walter Johnson, not to mention several books on Babe Ruth and general overviews such as Lawrence Ritter’s *Glory of Their Times* (1966). Gay’s volume will simultaneously satisfy many Indians’ devotees and leave baseball historians awaiting Alexander’s account. There is much to praise in Gay’s version. Simply writing a full-scale monograph for a mostly underrated Hall of Famer is a step in the right direction. Gay’s abilities to flesh out the rough-and-tumble background of the times, the politics and fandom of the cities in which Speaker played, the less-than-convivial relations between players and management in the decades that produced the Black Sox Scandal, and the transition from Deadball to Rabbitball are quite competent. The segment detailing the tragic death of Indians’ shortstop Ray Chapman in August of 1920 and Speaker’s reaction to the event is very compelling. Moreover, Gay does describe Speaker’s shortcomings—his racism and anti-Catholicism developed during his Texas upbringing.
And the book sets aside a full chapter to discuss the gambling scandal that surrounded Speaker and Ty Cobb in the 1920s.

As fine as some of these parts are, the book lacks balance. Gay commits the biographer’s sin of magnifying the person. Tris Speaker was not Babe Ruth nor Cobb nor Gehrig, nor even Joe DiMaggio, who late in the book does not rate as high as Speaker in Smoky Joe Wood’s estimation. Even after recounting the warts and all, Gay cannot keep from fawning about Speaker, establishing a familiarity beyond objectivity. For all of Speaker’s fielding prowess, Gay mentions how Speaker would at times misplay a fly ball or fail to catch up to a drive over his head. My guess is that despite Speaker’s new techniques of playing shallow, any modern journeyman centerfielder, let alone Torii Hunter or Ken Griffey, Jr., would out field him. The chummy tone of the book also undercuts any understanding of Speaker’s very real bigotry, softened only on a few occasions by contact with real Catholics and Jews. And unfortunately, in the chapter on the Cobb-Speaker betting scandal, Gay dances all around the question of their guilt. Gay seems to downplay the infractions of the pair by noting the other contemporary frequent assaults on the integrity of the game, some of which Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis acted upon while ignoring others. Gay could have benefited from the more assiduous research that David Fleitz did for his recent biography of “Shoeless Joe” Jackson. I suspect that Alexander’s forthcoming book will reflect deeper research and more detailed endnotes.

One last point. Gay wrote that Speaker’s third-base colleague Larry Gardner had virtually been forgotten in his hometown of Enosburg Falls, Vermont, with only a small plaque to remind visitors of his birthplace. Deadball era fans will be cheered to know that that Vermont town built and christened Larry Gardner Field in 1996, and this reviewer had the pleasure of watching a town ball contest played there as part of the opening festivities that year.

—Thomas L. Altherr

*Metropolitan State College of Denver*