

H-Net Reviews

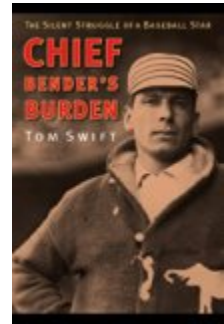
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tom Swift. *Chief Bender's Burden: The Silent Struggle of a Baseball Star*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 339 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4321-7.

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“Chief” Bender’s Lonely Walk through the Dead Ball Era

In recent years, books on Native American athletes and athletics have attracted both scholarly and popular audiences. C. Richard King’s academic anthology, *Native Athletes in Sport and Society* (2006), and Sally Jenkins’s popular account of Native college football, *The Real All Americans* (2008), serve as examples of the growing interest in this area of the intersection between race and the history of sport. Tom Swift’s biography of the half-Ojibwa hurler, Charles Albert “Chief” Bender, who starred for the Philadelphia Athletics during baseball’s dead ball era, makes a nice addition to this literature. A product of the Lincoln Educational Home and Carlisle Indian School, Bender rose from humble origins and overcame the pervasive racial prejudices of the early twentieth century to become one of the dominant pitchers of his era. Renowned Athletic’s owner and manager Connie Mack once called him “the greatest money pitcher the game has ever known” (p. 83).

Born to a German-American father and Native mother, Bender spent his early days on and around the White Earth Reservation in northwestern Minnesota. Much of his youth, however, took place at government-funded boarding schools, as his family’s large size and poverty pushed him away from the reservation. At both Lincoln and Carlisle, Bender endured a regimented lifestyle meant to exterminate his Indian identity and substitute what mainstream America deemed the more appropriate values of the white middle class. The youthful Bender evidently learned these lessons well, and, while never relinquishing, or allowed to forget, his racial

identity, he spent his adult life navigating the central avenues of American popular culture.

After graduating from Carlisle in 1902, Bender briefly attended Dickinson College’s prep school, but soon signed a minor league contract and, by 1903, at the age of nineteen, was a starting pitcher in the major leagues. For the next twelve seasons, Bender anchored a star-laden Athletics’ pitching staff that led Mack’s franchise to five American League championships and three World Series titles. Pitching with such all-time greats as George “Rube” Waddell, Eddie Plank, and Jack Coombs, Bender proved himself the equal of any pitcher in the game. In each of the seven seasons between 1904 and 1910, he posted a lower earned run average than he had the year before. In the 1911 World Series, Bender’s three complete games keyed the Athletics’ triumph over Christy Mathewson, John McGraw, and the powerful New York Giants. Known especially for his clutch performances on the biggest of stages, Mack called on Bender to start the first game of the 1910, 1911, 1913, and 1914 world championships. An intelligent pitcher who relied as much on craft and skill as natural ability, Bender was the first pitcher to use the pitch known to baseball fans today as the slider. In recognition of his 212 major league victories, three world championships, and many clutch performances, Bender won election to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1953.

Swift’s book clearly demonstrates the enduring strength and vitality of racial stereotypes and prejudices

in the early twentieth century. No matter how successfully Bender performed on the field, he remained an outsider in the eyes of the white majority. To them, his success depended as much on the innate racial characteristics imprinted on his genes as on the hard work, dedication, and persistence that distinguished other baseball stars. In this sense, we see that Native baseball players of the dead ball era endured many of the same subtle, and often not so subtle, prejudices that detracted from the achievements of other minority athletes over the course of the twentieth century. Throughout his career, and even during his later life, accounts of Bender's exploits in the popular press almost inevitably referred to him as the "grim Chippewa Chief," the "artful aborigine," "the Carlised son of the forest," or some other equally stereotypical pejorative (p. 60). In the end, in Swift's estimation, Bender endured a lifelong struggle to maintain his personal identity and dignity in the face of such discrimination. His success in doing so says as much about the pervasiveness of the prejudices he faced, as it does about the strength of character that guided Bender throughout his life. As Swift aptly chronicles, for minority athletes in general, and Native American baseball stars of the early twentieth century in particular, athletic success required more than just physical talent and mental discipline; it required the capacity to overcome overt and underlying prejudice and, when confronted with intractable discrimination, the ability (or luck) to find another path to success.

Biographers of early sports figures often face a subtle yet significant challenge as they recreate the lives and personalities of the figures they portray. On the one hand, their subjects, having lived in the center of the public eye, leave behind a copious trail of printed sources, usually newspaper and magazine accounts, detailing their words and actions for long periods of their most productive years. On the other hand, these same subjects, usually men (and a few women) of action, who place slight importance on recording their innermost thoughts, leave behind little in the way of personal papers and other types of sources that allow a biographer to know their subject intimately and to reconstruct them as a figure in three dimensions for their readers. At their worst, sports biographies written in this vein present a one-dimensional hero who changes little over the course of their life and whose personality mirrors more the congratulatory journalism of the era, or the preconceived notions of the author, than any human figure. Biographies of other early baseball stars have proven vulnerable to this failing. Swift avoids these potential pitfalls by

drawing on a wide range of printed sources as well as the memories of those who knew Bender the man. The result is a plausible, entertaining, and stimulating biography of a sports figure whose life, both on and off the field, symbolized in many ways the larger struggles faced by members of his race, even as his success proved the exception to the rule. While their counterparts on the reservations lived with the consequences of failed government policies, those Native Americans, like Bender, who sought assimilation faced the deeply ingrained and almost overwhelming scientific racism of mainstream America. For those slight few—again, like Bender—who succeeded in this task, their accomplishments never received the same degree of respect granted those of their fellow, white, competitors.

Ironically, perhaps, baseball lore remembers one of the game's greatest Native American athletes as much for one of the rare times he failed as for all of his triumphs. In the first game of the 1914 World Series, against the lightly regarded Boston Braves, Bender proved hittable and the Athletics suffered a dramatic and deflating 7-1 loss. It was the first of four straight defeats and the first ever World Series sweep, as the "Miracle" Braves decisively downed the heavily favored Athletics. It was also the final game Bender pitched for Mack, as both his age and alcohol abuse, joined with Mack's frugality, quickly pushed the two down separate paths. Bender signed to pitch in the upstart Federal League in 1915, but a disappointing season as that league collapsed preceded two average years with the Athletics' cross-town rivals, the National League's Philadelphia Phillies, before Bender left the majors at the end of 1917. Swift returns to Bender's performance in that opening game throughout his narrative and uses it to drive his story as he considers all the myriad forces that pushed his protagonist to that particular moment in baseball history. In the end, this makes for entertaining reading while also challenging some of the traditional story lines associated with this famous moment in baseball history. As Swift argues the case, it seems less likely that Bender was on the take from gamblers, or that he intentionally lost to protest Mack's salary policies, and more plausible that he was simply moving past his athletic prime and lost to a team in the midst of one of the game's most storied seasons.

Scholarly readers will appreciate the somewhat unorthodox, thirty-six page bibliographical essay that follows Swift's narrative. More a journalist than an academic biographer or historian, Swift nevertheless applies rigorous standards of evidence to both the documentary record and his narrative of Bender's life. The result is a

book that will appeal to both baseball fans as well as serious scholars. In reaching a broad constituency, however, Swift ensures that he will not please everyone. Hard-core baseball enthusiasts may wish for less of a focus on racial issues, while, at the opposite end of the spectrum, critical scholars may find his generally sympathetic portrayal of Richard Henry Pratt a bit surprising. In the end, how-

ever, Swift produces a thoughtful and entertaining study that adds to our knowledge and understanding of the life of one of baseball's great, and often overlooked, pitchers. He also provides readers of all persuasions with a concrete example of the interaction of race, sport, and popular culture in the early twentieth century.

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