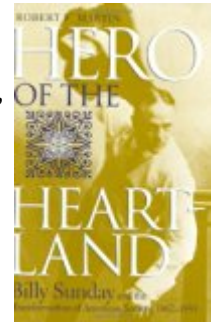


**Robert F. Martin.** *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862-1935.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002. xv + 163 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-34129-7.



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#### God's Man for Urban America

Between 1896 and 1935, an Iowa-born baseball player turned evangelist rose from obscurity to become America's leading revival preacher. Over the course of his four decades of preaching, William Ashley "Billy" Sunday brought the Gospel to an audience estimated in excess of 80 million people, thus demonstrating the popularity and broad reach of his preaching. His message of morality, piety, Christian masculinity, and success appealed to the hearts and minds of his listeners who, at the time, were struggling to cope with changes within their communities and nation brought about by industrialization and urbanization. As such, Sunday embodied, argues author Robert F. Martin, the values and attitudes of the American Heartland and considered principles of family, church, community, and individual success to be the means by which America would preserve its soul and succeed in enduring the social changes brought by the transition from a rural to an urban society.

Martin begins his story of Billy Sunday and his family in rural Iowa, describing how the

American Heartland's emphasis on Christian values and morality shaped Sunday's worldview. From the beginning of his life, Sunday experienced serious personal challenges, many caused by complex family relationships. Sunday lost his father before birth, endured his mother's subsequent marital problems (including an alcoholic stepfather), and eventually lived in an orphanage during his early teen years before moving to reside with his maternal grandfather. Martin argues that this scarred childhood, coupled with the rigid Christian environment of the orphanage, contributed to Sunday's insatiable drive throughout his life to succeed and ultimately to prove himself.

Sunday's initial flirt with fame came because of his athletic prowess. He joined a small-town baseball team and developed a reputation for fielding and base running. Within a short period of time, Adrian C. Anson, manager of the Chicago White Stockings, hired Sunday for his professional team. In 1883, Sunday departed rural life in Iowa to pursue a career in the big city as part of the emerging circle of professional organized sports. While demonstrating his athleticism to a

growing admiring audience, Sunday became the de facto business manager for the team, allowing him to hone managerial and organizational skills and to demonstrate honesty and integrity, thus establishing himself as a model player at a time when baseball was emerging as the nation's popular pastime.

Over the next few years, Sunday experienced three key events that would shape his future and define his role in America. While in Chicago, Sunday was drawn to the preaching of Harry Monroe and his Pacific Garden Mission, one of the numerous expressions of evangelical Protestantism in the city. The rescue mission, along with the YMCA, Salvation Army, and other socially conscious congregations, had begun offering assorted religious and social services to meet the growing needs of the urban population. At a down time in the 1886 baseball season, Sunday yielded to the mission's preacher and was "born again." He then met and married Helen Thompson, the daughter of a dairy products businessman, a relationship that moved Sunday solidly into the urban middle class. Finally, after a few more years of playing ball, during which time the press and the public recognized Sunday for his exemplary lifestyle, Billy joined the staff of the Chicago YMCA and embarked upon his career as an urban minister.

Martin argues convincingly that the new urban marketplace shaped Sunday's conversion and his successful urban ministry of four decades. Sunday was a charismatic preacher who approached his calling with competitive zeal, organizational efficiency, and aggressive marketing--all characteristics of the American business sector. He equated his success with the attendance and number of conversions at his revivals, the extent of press coverage, and the revenue generated from his preaching. He adopted a materialistic lifestyle--dressing in fine clothes, possessing fine cars and a rural retreat, and earning a substantial salary--thereby demonstrating to his audiences that it was not a sin to be rich; rather, pros-

perity was a sign of God's favor upon individuals as well as upon a nation.

Sunday's other significant contribution to urban evangelism, Martin concludes, was his aggressive, muscular approach to Christianity. The American public had generally perceived religion as rather passive and even effeminate; piety and morality were ideal characteristics of women. Sunday, however, sought to reinvigorate the religiosity of American men with "genuine manliness" by admonishing men to faith and success by encouraging them to stand up to temptations, demonstrate their commitment to family and community, and work to eradicate evils from society. This could only be accomplished through an aggressive, masculine approach to life, which Sunday exhibited through the physicality of his preaching--a clear outgrowth of his stint as a ballplayer--and which proved to be a popular means of reaching the hearts and minds of his male audience.

Urban revivalism paralleled the social activism of the Progressive era. As such, religious and civic leaders sought to improve conditions for the benefit of society. Sunday specifically saw Christianity as the way to redeem the nation and to ensure its future greatness. But his campaign for moral reform was founded upon the simple, traditional values of the Heartland--industriousness, piety, morality, self-restraint--not the values that were evident in modern urban America, except, of course, the business methods that shaped his successful ministry. While this approach helped Sunday's ministry in its peak years, the conflict between urban modernism and the "mystique of the Midwest," as Martin calls it, ultimately led to Sunday's eventual decline in popularity.

Martin provides a fascinating portrait of America's leading evangelist of the urban age. He successfully weaves discussions of the origins of organized baseball, the rise of evangelical Protestantism and Progressivism in the city, and the emergence of modern business practices through-

out his text and clearly illustrates how these developments in urban America shaped Billy Sunday and his highly successful ministry. Martin, however, focuses somewhat excessively on the psychological influences of his family problems on his ministry and thus his value as a human being. While this analysis provides some valuable insight into Sunday's attitudes and approaches towards his ministry, more emphasis on the actual content of his preaching might have provided the reader with a better sense of why the American public held this man in such high regard. Nevertheless, Martin does an excellent job in portraying Billy Sunday as the forerunner of contemporary televangelists and leaders of megachurches who employ emotional, rhetorical, and theatrical devices that are often considered to be innovative approaches to evangelism, but which actually were popularized by God's original heroic and "muscular" preacher for urban America.

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