

Deford, Frank. *Big Bill Tilden: The Triumphs and the Tragedy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976. Pp. 286. Index, Illustrations. \$8.95.

Pathetic in the end he was. In sore need of a shower and a clean suit of clothes, he roamed the Los Angeles tennis courts by day and cruised Beverly Hills and Sunset Boulevard in his Packard Clipper by night. His life then was balanced by boys; he taught them tennis—the smooth classic strokes that he had mastered a generation before—and he fondled them under the strobe light created by passing street lamps and automobile headlights. His instructions mixed beauty and shame, light and darkness. A man-child himself, he seemed to realize his tragedy but was unable to alter his drive toward self-destruction. Arrested a second time for “contributing to the delinquency of a minor,” he told Judge A. A. Scott, “Judge, I can’t help myself.” But by then it was too late anyway. Discarded by all but a few friends, scorned by a public that had never much liked him, and barred from many courts and tournaments, his real life had already ended.

Big Bill Tilden: The Triumphs and the Tragedy by Frank Deford, a feature writer for *Sports Illustrated*, is perhaps mistitled. It should be *Big Bill Tilden: The Tragedy*, for even the triumphs were marred. In the background, hidden from the glory and the lights, there was always the tragedy. His parents had had two families: the first—two girls and a boy—died within a month of each other from diphtheria. William Tilden II was the second child of the second family and he never escaped the tragedy of the first family. He became a “mamma’s boy,” pampered, guarded, sheltered from his peers, and smothered by his mother and music. But even these conditions did not remain stable: his mother became a invalid and then died; his father fell ill and then died; his elder brother grieved and then died. At the age of twenty-two, William was the family.

That Tilden emerged from these traumas psychologically scarred is hardly surprising. What is remarkable is that in a limited sense he adjusted to the circumstances. After living with women—first his mother and then his aunt and cousin—for close to twenty years, he moved on into the world of men. From a run-of-the-mill tennis player—he failed to make his college team and was ranked only number seventy when he was twenty-two years old—he made, literally made, stroke by stroke, himself into the best player in the world. It was a fairy tale metamorphosis: the frog became a dashing prince. And on the court the prince was crowned. He dominated his sport totally; for more than half of the 1920s he did not lose one—not a single one-major match. He won Forest Hills and led America to the Davis cup Crown annually, and when he chose to play at Wimbledon to the French championship he won those titles also.

Off the court, however, Tilden’s life contained no Disneyland trappings. He was a homosexual and he was lonely. It is little wonder that Tilden loved acting and actors; just to survive day after day in the exclusively heterosexual world of top flight tennis forced him to be continually on the stage, living a lie. Deford is at his best when describing Tilden’s tortured personal life: his

fear of being seen nude, his lonely search for a surrogate son, and his utter sense of not belonging anywhere but on a tennis court. It is a moving story.

In addition to a gripping tale, Deford relates the transformation of tennis from a staid Victorian amusement to a modern competitive sport. When Tilden began playing tennis, it was a rich man's diversion that was considered a sissy game; indeed, college wags referred to lawn tennis as "long penis." Dressed in long flannel pants and long-sleeved Oxford shirts, tennis players slapped around dirty, flat balls with poorly strung, heavy rackets. For a tennis player to consider teaching the game professionally was, as Deford says, "perfectly analogous to a young lady turning whore" (p. 28). By the time of Tilden's death, this world had all changed. Although he did not live to see open tennis, he did help to put professional tennis on firm financial ground.

Deford's story, then, is a fine balance between solid sport history, human tragedy, and triumphs on grass courts. It does, nevertheless, suffer from a rather disjointed telling. Rather than start at the beginning and work toward the end, Deford adapts the epic approach and commences *in media res*. He divides his book into two parts. The first deals with different aspects of Tilden's public life. Here we see Tilden at his tennis best and worst (which was still very good); we are told about his Forest Hills clashes with Little Bill Johnston and his Davis Cup struggles with the Four Musketeers (Cochet, Lacoste, Borotra, and Brugnon—France's answer to America's Four Horsemen); we meet Tilden the artist, Tilden the actor, and Tilden the competitor. In fact, in this section Tilden is so broken-up, dissected, and examined that we are apt to lose sight of the whole man. At times it's like looking at a medieval mosaic from a distance of six inches; the pieces look splendid but what of the whole? In part two we see more of the whole, but Deford has an annoying habit of repeating information about the pieces. Now we get the full story of the Tilden tragedy. However, in the course of this story Deford has to backtrack continually to the first part of the book, and as he does so we often have to listen to some anecdote or bit of information we have heard already. The result of all this is that we understand the Tilden tragedy but are not always sure what happened when.

Although one might question the efficacy of Deford's organizational scheme, there can be no debate about the fact that *Big Bill Tilden* is a well-written and informative study. Deford says that he interviewed over a hundred people, and his diligence gives the book a very human tone. Although the study lacks footnotes and a bibliography, it is clear that Deford examined the pertinent primary and secondary sources. Indeed, his discussion of Tilden's own tennis writings—both fictional and instructional—is particularly insightful. Deford gives yet another example that there is no mysterious barrier between popular nonfiction and good history.

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