

## Reading the Past

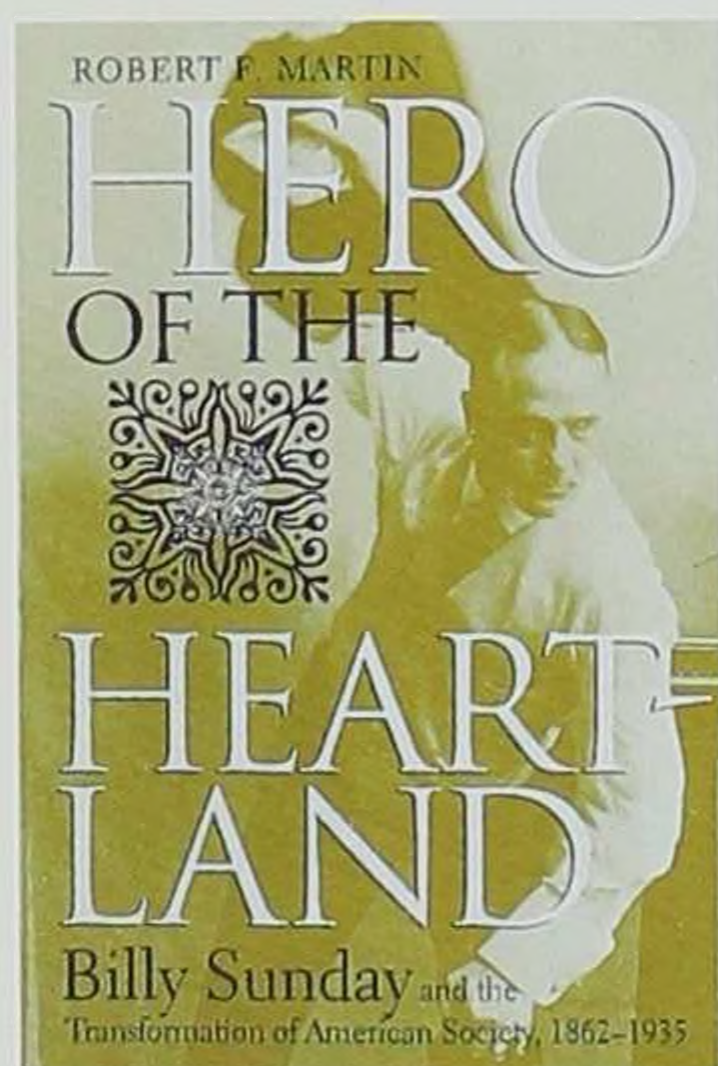
One of Iowa's most colorful native characters—and one of the nation's most popular Protestant evangelists—is the subject of *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862–1935*, by University of Northern Iowa history professor Robert F. Martin. As a revival preacher, Billy Sunday was probably most renowned for his onstage antics. As one reporter has noted, “he would shed his coat, then his vest, then his tie, and finally roll up his sleeves as he whipped back and forth, crouching, shaking his fist, springing, leaping and falling in an endless series of imitations. He would impersonate a sinner trying to reach heaven like a ball player sliding for home—and illustrate by running and sliding the length of the improvised tabernacle stage.”

Billy Sunday's life and his early evangelistic career both began in Iowa. His early years in Iowa were not happy ones. After his father died while serving in the Civil War,

he and one of his brothers spent a couple of years in orphanages in Glenwood and Davenport before moving in with their grandfather on his farm near Ames. His initial claim to a degree of national recognition came as a major league baseball player, first in Chicago as a protégé of fellow Iowan Adrian “Cap” Anson, then in Pittsburgh. In Chicago he experienced a religious conversion and, equally significant for his future career, married Helen “Nell” Thompson. Eventually he gave up his modestly successful professional baseball career to take up full-time work as an evangelist. Beginning with small crusades in Iowa and surrounding states, Sunday gradually developed a reputation as a successful evangelist and

established society. Sunday's rather undistinguished major league baseball career took place during an era that saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of professional sports, from which Sunday drew important lessons and lively stories that engaged his later audiences. Sunday's successful evangelistic career also paralleled the emergence of a “cult of masculinity” and “muscular Christianity,” which joined Theodore Roosevelt and such institutions as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in seeking to address concerns that Christianity had been “feminized” in recent decades and that American manhood in general was in a perilous state. Martin draws other fascinating connections between Sunday's rising popularity and the changing nature of Protestant evangelism, the rise of big business, and the Progressive movement. In one of the book's most interesting and unique twists, Martin also illustrates how Sunday's career reflected the trajectory of the reputation of the region from which he came. From the turn of the century to World War I, when Sunday's popularity was at its height, the Midwest was often seen as the region that epitomized the best of American culture. By the 1920s and 1930s, as Martin says, “both Billy Sunday and the Middle West seemed to millions increasingly quaint, ludicrous, or irrelevant.” In short, Martin seems to suggest that Sunday's appeal to the masses came as much or more from the remarkable parallels between some of the most significant historical trends of his time and his message, style, and practices as it did from the apparently idiosyncratic onstage antics on which previous historians have focused.

In addition to his ability to help readers make the connection between Billy Sunday's life and his times when it's all too easy to see him as an anomaly, Martin also resists the temptation to pass easy judgment on a character whose flaws will be evident to most readers. Martin's interpretations reflect an empathy that helps readers understand Sunday's appeal, rather than an antipathy that would undermine such understanding. And Martin writes well for a scholar determined to maintain an appropriate scholarly distance from his subject. He does not focus on Sunday's bizarre antics, but his subject is colorful enough for some of that color to come through anyway. Readers will find much food for thought, as well as an introduction to a fascinating historical character, in this engaging book, which masterfully situates one of Iowa's liveliest native sons in his place and time. ♦



*Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862–1935*, by Robert F. Martin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. xi, 163 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.95 cloth.

expanded into ever larger urban markets. By 1910, he was the most successful evangelist in the United States. In a ten-week campaign in New York City in 1917, he claimed to have converted nearly 100,000 souls, with more than 100,000 more in Boston and Chicago.

Such is the main outline of Billy Sunday's life and career. That outline is clearly portrayed in Martin's book, but this is not a comprehensive biography. Rather than a dramatic and detailed account of Billy Sunday's fascinating life and spectacular career, Martin's book is really a series of artfully crafted and well-integrated interpretive essays relating aspects of Sunday's life to larger movements in American society during his lifetime. Beginning with Sunday's troubled childhood in Iowa as a Civil War orphan, Martin shows how Sunday absorbed a distinctive set of midwestern values that developed at a time when the region was making a rapid transition from frontier to

Robert F. Martin won the 2003 Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award for *Hero of the Heartland*. With that award the State Historical Society of Iowa recognized the work as the most significant book on Iowa history published in 2002.

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