



Brother Bill McKechnie

Baseball Hall of Fame Manager and Fifty-Year Mason ©

by Sir Knight Ivan Tribe

Nobody ever accused Bill McKechnie of being a great baseball player. He was good enough to make the major leagues but was average at best. However, as a manager he was atypically outstanding. Lee Allen, the baseball historian of a generation earlier, described the man called the "Deacon," as a "wily ascetic ... shrewd handler of men and a genius at getting the most out of pitchers." In his years as a manager in the National League, he managed to bring in four pennant winners and two world championships. When one considers that many-if not most-of his managing years were spent with cash-strapped franchises, his achievements seem even more remarkable. On top of all that, McKechnie spent more than fifty years as a Mason.

William Boyd McKechnie was born of Scottish ancestry in Wilksburg, Pennsylvania, on August 7, 1886. His parents, Archibald and Mary Murray McKechnie, had immigrated to the upper Ohio valley from the greater Glasgow area. It was said of young Bill that he inherited from his parents the typical Scottish characteristics of being "dour, thrifty, and canny." Like many American youth, especially those in the greater Pittsburgh area, McKechnie fell in love

with baseball. After some semi-pro experiences, he entered the minors in 1906, via the Washington franchise in the Pennsylvania-Ohio-Maryland League, a Class D loop with teams extending from Zanesville, Ohio, to Cumberland, Maryland, with most of the teams in the Keystone State. His major league baseball career began in 1907 when the near-his-hometown Pittsburgh Pirates called him up in late summer to play third-base. He made his debut with the Bucs on September 8. It was hardly a spectacular beginning. Bill appeared in three games getting one hit in eight times at the plate for a .125 average.

Over the next five years McKechnie divided his time between the Pirates, Canton of the Ohio Pennsylvania League where he played regularly and hit a respectable .274, and St. Paul of the American Association. His best year with Pittsburgh came in 1911 when he hit .227 appearing in 104 games. Not long afterwards, he went briefly to the Boston Braves and then to the New York Highlanders, then managed by Frank Chance, once famed as the "peerless leader" of the Chicago Cubs. By this time, Bill was gaining a reputation as one of the shrewdest baseball men around in spite of his limited talents as a player. Fred Lieb (a Mason), one of the best-known baseball writers, is alleged to have asked the manager why he kept a .134 hitter like McKechnie next to him on the bench. Chance replied "because Bill McKechnie has more brains than the rest of this dumb club put together."

In the meantime the young Scotsman married Berlyn Bien in 1911. She passed away in 1957. The McKechnies had four children including Bill, Jr. who went into the business side of baseball and served in various capacities including Director of the Cincinnati Reds farm system and President of the Pacific Coast League from 1968 until 1973 and also became a Mason. The other children were James, Beatrice, and Carol.

In 1914, William Boyd McKechnie joined Orient Lodge No. 590 in Wilkinsburg, ironically giving his occupation as "salesman," which must have been his off-season job. He received his degrees on May 26, 1914, November 17, 1914, and December 20, 1914. He also belonged to the Scottish Rite, joining the Valley of Pittsburgh in November 1915. His other Masonic affiliations included Syria Shrine Temple in Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Court No. 2 of the Royal Order of Jesters. On February 2, 1940, he received the 33° by special dispensation in Pittsburgh. On June 2, 1964, he received his fifty year pin from the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. Known for his regular attendance and choir membership in the local Methodist church, he earned the nickname "Deacon."

McKechnie soon got the opportunity to play regularly when a new major league, "the outlaw" Federal League entered the picture. Bill joined the Indianapolis club and experienced his best season as a player, playing regularly at third base, compiling a .304 average in 149 games, and chalking up 47 stolen bases. The team was loaded with talent; five players hit over .300 with Benny Kauff as their top star and another future Hall of Fame member Edd Roush leading the way to a first place finish. Nonetheless, the club lost money, and the owner transferred the franchise to Newark, New Jersey, in 1915. McKechnie hit only .257, but in mid-season he got his first shot as a manager. His team compiled a winning record but proved unable to lift the team out of fifth place. Nonetheless his reputation as being baseball smart continued to grow and improve. With the demise of the Federal League, Bill returned to the Nationals with the New York Giants.

A Giant for slightly more than half a season, McKechnie with Edd Roush and Christy Mathewson was traded to the Cincinnati Reds on July 20, 1916. The latter became the Reds manager, and Bill continued in his familiar role as a utility infielder. By 1918, he was back with the Pirates where he experienced one of his better seasons, hitting .255. Closing out his major league career with the Bucs in 1920 with a .216 average in 46 games, Bill had one more year as a player hitting .321 with Minneapolis of the American Association; he came back to Pittsburgh as a coach in 1922. When Manager George Gibson had problems maintaining discipline, he resigned and McKechnie became the Pirate skipper. The stern Scotsman had more success, and despite the antics of such rowdy players as Rabbit Maranville and Moses Yellowhorse, brought the team in for a third place finish. Two more similar seasons followed, and then in 1925, the Pirates won their first pennant since 1909. With future Hall of Famers like Max Carey, Harold "Pie" Traynor (also a Mason), and Hazen "Kiki" Cuyler, the Pirates also took the World Series over the Washington Senators.

The 1926 season proved a disappointment for both McKechnie and Pirate fans. Much of the problem resulted from a feud between star player Max Carey and former Pirate manager and club Vice President Fred Clarke. Carey was released on waivers to Brooklyn on August 18. The team slipped to third and, Bill's "contract was not renewed for 1927." He closed his career as Pirate manager with 409 victories against 293 defeats. Needing a job, the Wilkesburg native signed with the world champion St. Louis Cardinals as a coach for 1927.

The Redbirds slipped to second place under new manager Bob O'Farrell and in 1928, the front office elevated McKechnie to become manager in 1928. Bill led the Cards to another pennant but lost the World Series to the virtually unstoppable New York Yankees club. Owner Sam Breadon sent McKechnie to Rochester and brought in Red Wing manager Billy Southworth to St. Louis. However, Southworth wasn't ready for the big time yet, and by July, the owner brought McKechnie back to St. Louis to finish the season. This time Breadon admitted his error and offered the Deacon a two year contract. In essence Bill said "thanks but no thanks" and signed a longer management contract with the Boston Braves.

Although Brother McKechnie's eight-year tenure in Boston did not bring any pennants to Braves Field, the manager received numerous positive marks for doing as well as he could with what he had. The franchise tended to be both cash-strapped and talent-limited during those depression wracked years. At his best, the Deacon provided Beantown fans with three winning seasons and another break-even year. At his worst, the 1935 Braves team had one of the poorest seasons in National League history winning 38 and losing 115 (being just slightly worse than the 1961 New York Mets). It was his only managing job in the majors where his teams had an overall losing record, and many considered him a virtual miracle worker for doing as well as he did. In 1936, the new owner renamed the team the Boston Bees, but it did not bring about substantial improvement. Bill received Manager of the Year honors in 1937, just for bringing in a winning record (79-73) and a fifth place finish.

After the expiration of his last contract with the Boston Bees, Bill McKechnie received several managerial offers but accepted that of the Cincinnati Reds. The latter franchise had also endured hard times during the depression years, but some seeds of improvement had already been sown. Local business tycoon Brother Powell Crosley had bought the bankrupt club in 1933 and hired Brother Larry McPhail to run it. After finishing in the cellar for four

consecutive years, the team had climbed to sixth and fifth in 1935 and 1936, but fell back to the bottom in 1937. They had a nucleus of a better team, however, with solid performers like Ernie Lombardi, Paul Derringer, Frank McCormick, and Ival Goodman. McKechnie induced Crosley to buy pitcher (and Brother) Bucky Walters from the Phillies in mid-season, and he went on to win eleven games for the Reds. Johnny VanderMeer pitched a pair of back-to-back no-hitters in raising the Reds to fourth place, finishing only six games out of first. As Reds historian Lee Allen recalled, "Writers tabbed the Reds as the team of the future."

The future came to pass in 1939 and 1940. Walters and Derringer were at their peak winning a total of 50 games the first year and 42 in the second, while rookie, Junior Thompson, proved to be an able starter. Billy Werber held down third base while Lonnie Frey and Billy Myers patrolled the middle of the infield, and Harry Craft gave the Reds their best center fielder since Edd Roush. In 1940, McKechnie found a fourth able starter in veteran Jim Turner who had won twenty games as a thirty-four year old rookie in Boston for the Scotsman in 1937. The Yankees humiliated the Reds in the 1939 World Series, but in 1940, the boys from Cincinnati defeated Detroit in a seven game series and became the champions of baseball. Derringer and Walters won two games each in that series.

While the Reds were at their peak in those years, one might take note that Masonic influence was strong. Club owner Powell Crosley belonged to College Hill Lodge No. 641. In addition to manager McKechnie, coaches Hank Gowdy and Jimmy Wilson both held membership in the fraternity. Team members who were or eventually became Masons included Bucky Walters, Bill Werber, Billy Myers, and Junior Thompson.



Brother Bill McKechnie as Reds manager with club owner, Brother Powell Crosley.

The 1941 Reds fell to third place, and then World War II and the aging process took its toll on the squad. The team remained in the first division through 1944, managing to finish a distant second in 1944. The next two years were even worse as the 1945 team dropped to seventh (61-93), and only the 1935 Braves lost more games among McKechnie teams. The first postwar Red squad was only slightly better, and with the fans demanding a new manager, Bill was dropped. It didn't help; his successors did worse, and there was no winning home team at Crosley Field until 1956. Brother McKechnie's career in the national pastime continued as a coach with the Cleveland Indians from 1947 until 1949 and with the Boston Red Sox in 1952 and 1953.

Thereafter, he retired to Bradenton, Florida, where the Pittsburgh Pirate spring training ballpark was named McKechnie Field in their former manager's honor. In 1962, as the only manager ever to win pennants for three separate franchises, Brother McKechnie was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. After his death on October 29, 1965, "due to complications caused by a lingering illness of leukemia and virus pneumonia." his services were held in the Trinity

Methodist Church in Bradenton on November 1 with many baseball dignitaries in attendance. Burial took place in Manasota Memorial Park in Oneco, Florida. Election to the Cincinnati Reds Hall of Fame took place in 1967.

Brother Bill McKechnie was remembered as one of the best National League managers. His teams won four pennants and two World Series. All of the teams he managed had winning records except for the Boston Braves, and his work there was considered a tribute to what a good skipper can do with a weak team. According to the Baseball Encyclopedia, Bill McKechnie stood only five feet nine inches tall; his obituary in the Scottish Rite records quoted a long-time friend as saying he was "a humble but great man, a devoted husband, and an ardent believer in prayer." But as a man and as a Mason, he stood much taller

Bibliography

Bill McKechnie lacks an adequate biographer, but much information may be gleaned from the histories of teams that he managed. Among the best are Brian Mulligan, *The 1940 Cincinnati Reds* (McFarland & Co., 2005) and Lee Allen, *The Cincinnati Reds* (Putnam, 1948). Others include Frederick Lieb's two classics, *The Pittsburgh Pirates* (Putnam, 1948); and *St. Louis Cardinals: The Story of a Great Baseball Club* (Putnam, 1944); and Harold Kaese, *The Boston Braves* (Putnam, 1948). For McKechnie's Masonic records, I am indebted to the staff at the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and to the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite, NMJ. Thanks also to Sir Knight Roger E. VanDyke for his careful proofreading.

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