Larry Powell’s *Black Barons of Birmingham* is an interesting albeit curious work that while offering some new ground for the continued study of the Negro leagues story nonetheless seems to fall into the unfortunate trap of having no discernible audience in mind. Though the information is solid and the construction and planning of the text is interesting on its face—alone, the oral history component is quite compelling—the book itself appears destined to be used as research fodder for other related works without having an opportunity to carve out its own niche within the broader discussion of Negro League Baseball.

The biggest challenge here is how relatively obscure and seemingly unremarkable many of the names are against the bigger picture. This is not to disparage once and former Barons. Quite the contrary, anyone who could have played ball in the Jim Crow South under such conditions is certainly due his day in the sun. The problem is that while Powell seems determined to bring to light Barons from every era, the book ultimately seems to bog down under the weight of the endless lists of players, many of whom had what can best be described as a quick cup of coffee before they were released or otherwise faded into the background. Thus, while Powell, Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, can on the one hand take great liberties by adding Satchel Paige to the list of once and former Black Barons, offering a thorough and engaging portrait of this inimitable if not ubiquitous drawing card, beyond Willie Mays and perhaps a few other more less popular names, i.e. Piper Davis, Jesse Mitchell, and Dan Bankhead, the typically overlooked companion to Jackie Robinson when Robinson made the leap to white ball, there is not a good deal beyond the relatively few in which the general public can sink its curious teeth. On the other hand, there is the equally troubling dilemma of those with more than a mere curiosity or a popular grasp of black ball, namely its researchers. For us, there is simply too little that hasn’t become part of the more commonly held cache of information, and thus the rub.
In terms of the work itself, it certainly demonstrates some shining moments. There are the introductory portions that lead into each segment, cordoned off in Part I by decade (Part II is organized more thematically) and peppered with interesting contextual summaries. These are particularly engaging, especially as scene setters. From there, Powell goes on to paint portraits of varying lengths regarding the men who contributed to this storied albeit admittedly often overlooked franchise, but often times his reworking of these biographies read more hagiographic than investigative, another of those elements that seems to place the text in this “Tweener” stage. But this is not to say that there aren’t some stunners, including a most thorough rendering of Country & Western star and former Baron Charley Pride in an overtly baseball context, one that ultimately reaffirms that the tragedy of Negro ball remained outside the lines.

In all there is a great deal to like about this work. It is obviously well researched and emerges from a most provocative if not ambitious plan. Still, there is no getting around the fact that for some, much of this is repetitive while for others it reads more encyclopedic than straight-ahead scholarship. As the back cover suggests, it is indeed a “unique approach to the history of a Negro League team,” but one might also ask for what end.