The word “definitive” is used too frequently and too loosely when describing biographies. Indeed, it has become nearly part of a phrase, as if no other word appropriately accompanies “biography”. Despite its overuse, however, no other word does justice to Lee Lowenfish’s wonderful biography of Branch Rickey published by the University of Nebraska; no one will have to write another Rickey biography for a very long time.

The book is as full of vigor and as engaging as was Rickey himself. The prose is both lucid and vibrant, never tending toward clichés or repetition. It is easy to read, focused, and nicely progressive. The details sustain the narrative appropriately and there are enough common themes to tie the chapters together without any sense of discontinuity.

I dislike biographies of sports figures that make too much of the subject’s childhood and ancestry; this book avoids that pitfall. It gives the necessary amount of background information and then moves to the things that made Branch Rickey memorable. The book jumps right into the middle of the action with a young Branch Rickey shouting, “Do you think you can run me out of a
“job?” to some belligerent students at his first job. The schoolhouse scene ends with Rickey challenging one particularly obnoxious student to a fight—and whipping him good. That fight is meant to portray one half of Rickey’s personality hinted at in the subtitle: Baseball’s Ferocious Gentleman.

Rickey was, in fact, more of a gentleman than a fighter. Lowenfish captures Rickey’s unrelenting sense of decency and moral rectitude throughout the book in his never-ending admonishments to young players to get married young and live a dedicated family life, in his sabbatarian abstention from Sunday baseball, and in his unyielding support for racial equality. The stories that paint this picture leap off the page as one imagines a young Roberto Clemente listening to Rickey tell him to “find a nice girl and marry her” or the numerous speeches that Rickey delighted in giving in support of integration.

While Jackie Robinson’s story is one of the most important in Rickey’s life, Lowenfish’s biography captures a remarkable number of interests, activities, and achievements. We find Rickey at home with children and grandchildren, speaking to civic groups on politics or morality, flying across the country to see prospects, designing training regimens, battling Judge Landis, and ever searching for new ways to win. One wonders, when finished, how anyone could have done so much in one lifetime.

Rickey’s baseball lifetime was full of numerous things that all we baseball fans have heard about: his role in developing farm systems, his successful push for racial integration in baseball, his success in building winners in St. Louis, Brooklyn, and Pittsburgh, and his failed attempt to
establish a third major league. But Lowenfish surprises by surrounding these facts with narrative that makes them interesting even to those who know the stories. We see the ebb and flow of baseball talent, the behind-the-scenes conflicts with owners, struggles with managers, pacification of aging stars and errant youth, and above all the calm determination that built the winners on a foundation of players with character and skills. With all of the detail supporting these broad themes, the book does what it is supposed to do: give a clear and lasting picture of an exceptional life.

Lowenfish’s book is an appropriate—and I believe lasting—tribute to a truly great baseball mind. I recommend it to reader’s unfamiliar with Rickey, as well as to those who know Rickey’s life well.