Foreword by Monte Irvin

Baseball has been good to me for seventy years. I played with and against some of the greatest players in the history of the game—Josh Gibson, Joe DiMaggio, Satchel Paige, Bob Feller, Mule Suttles, Willie Mays, Ted Williams, Ray Dandridge, Mickey Mantle, Leon Day, Hank Aaron, Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, Frank Robinson, and Martin Dihigo, to name only a few. Willie Wells belongs in that group, but you don't often hear his name. That's why I'm pleased that Bob Luke decided to tell Wells's story.

I knew Wells. I played with him as a member of the Newark Eagles, one of the Negro league's most prominent teams. I visited him while I was playing with the New York Giants, and he was working in a deli in the Wall Street section of New York City. We went to the fiftieth major-league all-star game in Chicago together in 1983.

Wells really could do it all. He was one of the slickest fielding shortstops ever to come along. He had speed on the bases. He hit with power and consistency. He was among the most durable players I've ever known. He was still winning games with home runs as a player-manager in Canada at the age of forty-seven.

He was smart. He was known as the "Shakespeare of Shortstops." He knew where most balls would be hit before the pitch was thrown. He understood the game better than most and knew how to teach the fine points of the game to others, including myself. He was generous with his knowledge. He'd talk baseball to anyone—teammate, opponent, young kid—anywhere: on the field, in hotel rooms and lobbies,

on those long bus rides, in the dugout and the clubhouse. He even invented the first modern-day batting helmet.

Like many Negro-league superstars who were too old for the majors when the color line was broken, Wells wasn't recognized by white society until too late. He wasn't inducted into the Hall of Fame until 1997, eight years after his death and forty-three years after he retired. I was honored to be elected to the Hall of Fame, and I was equally honored to join with other members of the Hall of Fame's Veterans Committee to elect Willie Wells.

Luke discusses how the first Negro leaguers were inducted into the Hall between 1971 and 1977. It's hard to overstate the importance of this bit of baseball history to organized baseball and the Negro leagues and their players. It was the death knell of the mind-set that the best of black players were not as good as the best of white players. I am proud to have played a part in that history as chairman of the Hall's Negro Leagues Committee during its existence, from 1971–1977.

Wells, like so many black stars of his era, did not find fame and riches awaiting him at retirement—quite the opposite. Few whites in his hometown of Austin, Texas, had heard of him. He was in poor health and getting by on Social Security during the last years of his life. And while he kept saying he didn't mind the lack of recognition, he would have been gratified to know that citizens of Austin did, after his death, honor him with a special day, designate his home as a historic building, write a play about him, and rebury him in Texas's most prestigious cemetery.

This book is another fitting tribute to Wells. I recommend it to you.