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Correction Appended

## **A TANGLED FAMILY TREE **EDWARD BALL** SET OUT TO LOCATE HIS KIN, FROM PLANTATION DAYS TO THE PRESENT. HE FOUND BLACK COUSINS AND WHITE RELATIVES WHO WEREN'T HAPPY WITH THE IDEA.**

**BYLINE:** Julia M. Klein, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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It was a triumphant homecoming for **Edward Ball**, scion of South Carolina slaveholders who once owned 25 rice plantations and 4,000 human beings.

For the last three years, Ball, 39, former architecture critic for the Village Voice, had upset his own white relatives and sustained attacks in the black press because of his unusual quest: to track down descendants of families that had once belonged to his family.

His research led him from Southern archives, where he pored through his family's prodigious plantation records and correspondence, to the living rooms of distant cousins living on the other side of the color line. He tripped over the cracks in the family myth of the benevolent master, and he sought reconciliation with a past that still seemed burdensome - to him, to his family and to America.

The result was his first book, a mix of history, journalism and memoir called *Slaves in the Family*. It has attracted mostly glowing reviews and landed Ball on national television, including an emotional appearance on Oprah.

Last month in Charleston, S.C., launching a 25-city book tour, Ball presided over an extraordinary gathering - a standing-room-only lecture attended by members of the Ball family and African American families connected to them by America's terrible legacy of slavery and, in some cases, by ties of blood.

"It was very dramatic," says Ball, recalling the scene during a luncheon interview in Washington. "The energy in the room was electrifying . . . I asked the black families to stand, and I asked the Balls to stand. They'd never met each other. I'm the only intermediary between my family and the black folks. And there was mad applause and this sense of relief and possibility."

Later, the two groups mingled over refreshments. "It was," says Ball, "historically unique."

On Thursday, Ball is scheduled to appear in Philadelphia at the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies to lecture and show slides. The event, which is free, is being cosponsored by the Joseph Fox Bookshop. Planning to attend are Carolyn Smalls Goodson, Bea McGirth and Leon Smalls, three African American siblings related to Ball through a common white ancestor, James Poyas. It was Ball who provided precise genealogical evidence about the link - and a photocopied drawing of Poyas that now hangs in Goodson's Mount Airy living room.

Until the winter of 1996, the Philadelphians and Ball had never met. But these days, when Goodson, 47, telephones Ball, she greets him with a cheery, "Hi, Cousin Ed."

\* A classically handsome, Ivy-educated writer with a moral seriousness unsurprising in a minister's son, Ball was raised in towns across the South. He spent much of his childhood on Sullivan's Island, near Charleston, where slave ships used to dock and slaves were quarantined.

Even then, Ball says, he was haunted by his plantation heritage. The Ball family fortune was decimated by the Civil War, and the last plantation was recently sold. But Ball says he inherited a sense of cultural entitlement that led him to film studies at Brown University and the University of Iowa, and then a career as an arts writer in New York.

Another legacy was the rich lore of a family that had meticulously documented its achievements and reversals ever since the arrival of Elias "Red Cap" Ball at his uncle's plantation of Comingtee, on South Carolina's Cooper River, in 1698.

As an adult, Ed Ball remembered his Southern childhood, "and the stories that my father's family had spoken of were percolating. But I didn't know how to process them." It was a 1993 Ball family reunion that seemed to open the door to the past. "I knew immediately that was an opportunity for me . . . to re-enter the story, and try to make sense of it," he says.

Ball first conceived of juxtaposing the memories of his relatives with those of blacks descended from Ball slaves in a special for National Public Radio. Reunion organizers prohibited him from tape-recording their gathering. But he was able to interview some relatives afterward, as well as a few descendants of Ball slaves.

With one elderly woman, Emily Frayer, and her family, he made a poignant pilgrimage to the plantation cabin where Frayer was born. Frayer told Ball that one of his ancestors had whipped her great-aunt and that her grandfather had been sold away from his family "just like you sell a chicken." As they wandered the grounds together, Ball told her: "I'm sorry for what my family did to your family." She consoled him, and they wept together.

The award-winning piece aired in March 1994, but Ball says: "I felt like I'd just touched the surface. I stepped up to a vista, and saw the scale of the story. It was daunting."

There were, he estimated, at least 75,000 descendants of Ball family slaves. How was he to locate them? To make contact? To begin to heal the wounds of slavery?

\* There was also the question of why he should bother in the first place.

Certainly, many white family members were none too happy with the attempt. While some in his own generation quietly encouraged him, he says, older relatives were "quite upset." Some declined to speak with him. But, he says, no one tried to stop him.

Still, controversy has swirled around Ball's motives.

At least one African American commentator accused him of appropriating black history. Writing in New York's City Sun, Stefani Zinerman, one of the paper's editors, called Ball's quest "an impossible dream" and stated flatly, "The saga of slavery cannot be discussed by slave master and slave, even over a mint julep and a sincere 'I'm sorry.'"

Ball himself admits that his apology to Frayer - and another, on Oprah, to the Roper family - was "divisive."

In a 1994 Washington Post Magazine story, his cousin, Jeff Ball, a real estate agent in Mount Pleasant, S.C., reacted searingly to the NPR apology. "If Ed wants to go around and apologize, Ed's free to go around and apologize," he said. "But quite frankly, Ed didn't own any slaves. He isn't responsible for slavery or anybody's misfortunes."

In a recent review in the Washington Post, Jonathan Yardley picked up the same theme, condemning what he called the book's "hand-wringing" and "forelock-tugging."

Ball is still stung by the criticism.

He says he wrote the book, and undertook the personal encounters it describes, to overcome what he calls "my personal ignorance."

"It was my problem, on the one hand, and it was an American problem, on the other, which was the deafening silence about black life in early America, and the nervous exclusion of black experience from the main stories of Southern history."

In *Slaves in the Family*, Ball writes: "Despite my having left the South, the plantation past was etched on my unconscious. . . . To contemplate slavery - which for most Americans is a mysterious, distant event - was a bit like doing psychoanalysis on myself."

But the personal quickly became political. "It's difficult for white people to acknowledge that we as a race are who we are because of the legacy of slavery," Ball argues. "It's a terrifying fact," and one that directly contravenes many deeply held American myths.

"One problem," Ball says, "is that each family has a sentimental version of its history. And in many white families, there is this narrative: 'My people suffered. They came to America, and they suffered some more.' . . . It's difficult for people from Ellis Island families to acknowledge that their struggle was 10 times easier than the struggle of native-born black people during Jim Crow."

Ball sought out black descendants of Ball slaves because "I wanted, as an individual, to make some attempt at reconciliation. I'm not a government agency, I'm not a foundation. . . . I wanted to make what inadequate gesture I could. . . ."

"It wasn't guilt, because I could not have influenced the behavior of my ancestors, so I'm not actually responsible for it. . . . But it was a sense of my life as being shaped by plantation slavery as much as the lives of black people."

Saying he was sorry - for events that occurred centuries ago but that still resonate in the present - was "an important symbolic step," Ball says. But he adds: "I thought it was too small a gesture for the weight of what actually happened."

Underlying his efforts is an idealism that some may find naive. "I really believe," Ball says, "if black people and white people sit

down and talk about the worst possible things, it helps us both. And the quotient of justice in the world increases. Just by talking."

\* In 1994, Ed Ball moved to Charleston, rented a decrepit mansion, and began combing through the voluminous records kept by his family - among them, advertisements for slave auctions, property records and sharecropper contracts in which "the stories of black families are hidden."

Most of the tales he'd heard as a child focused on his family's colorful personalities, their marriages, financial dealings and wartime experiences.

As far as slaves went, Ball says, "the idea in the family was that the black people had it pretty good because they were taken care of, cradle to grave." The Balls believed that slave families were always kept together, and that violence was minimal. As cousin Nellie Ball Brennan, of Columbia, S.C., puts it: "They lived in the house, sort of like domestic help, and it was a lovely relationship."

Nor was there, Ball says, any story of interracial sex.

What he discovered through his researches was that his ancestors were "capable of cruelty and sexual domination and violence." Amid slave lists and auction notices, he found evidence of whippings and even amputations, of families that were separated to swell the Balls' financial coffers, and of a Ball relative, Henry Laurens, who was colonial America's most successful slave trader. In *Slaves in the Family*, he presents it all.

In the book's final chapter, Ball describes a trip to Sierra Leone during which he confronts the descendants of black slave sellers, including one ruling family. "I think our families have a shared responsibility," he tells them.

Through his family's archives and black oral histories, Ball also uncovered a variety of interracial relationships whose precise emotional contours are now obscured, perhaps forever, by the intervening centuries. In one case, for example, he found that William Harleston, who was white, lived in a common-law marriage with his former slave, Kate Wilson. They had eight children, and Harleston willed Wilson money and property.

Interracial pairings represent "the subject that's most painful to black people," says Ball. "The majority of cases were cases of sexual violence. The rare case was the case of the longstanding love affair." But, he adds, "even to use the word love is problematic."

By dint of luck, word-of-mouth, visits to genealogical societies, advertisements in black-oriented newspapers, telephone calls, and going door-to-door in the neighborhoods near old family plantations, Ball gradually made contact with several black families descended from his family's slaves. Some were relatives; some weren't.

"Facing people for the first time was not easy," says Ball, who was aided by his then-girlfriend. "It was probably even harder for the black people."

The first reaction of the black families was often astonishment, he says. "Once they got over their shock, they were curious," wondering whether he knew something about their families that they didn't. "And in many cases, I did," says Ball. "I knew where their people lived, and what their jobs were. . . . And I brought it, and I shared it with them. As the weeks and months passed, people gradually began to trust me and accept my presence in their life."

\* Among the closest relationships Ball developed was with Carolyn Smalls Goodson and her family.

The doormat at Goodson's stone Mount Airy twin says "Welcome," and Goodson seems to personify it. Wearing a brown pants outfit, with her elaborately braided hair held together by a rhinestone barrette, she leads a visitor into a living room gleaming with mirrors, crystal and the colored glass she collects at area flea markets.

Much of the Philadelphia branch of the Smalls family gathered there last Sunday to tell their side of the Ball story, including Goodson's sister, Bea McGirth, 57, and her brother, the wryly taciturn Leon Smalls, 55.

"Carolyn believes that love and acceptance are the road to reconciliation," Ball had said in Washington. "Mr. Smalls believes that reconciliation is not possible because what white people did to black people was so nightmarish that it cannot be answered."

But on closer inspection, such dichotomies turn out to be too simple. Goodson, too, has her share of anger at lingering racial injustice - indignities such as store clerks following her around, and a patron at a casino-hotel who, with no evidence, accused one of her sons of stealing his wallet. "That was painful," she says.

About Ed Ball, however, she is unabashedly enthusiastic. "He's warm, he's caring, he's very sensitive," she says. He was at her mother's bedside when she was ill, she says, and later sent the family \$2,000 for their contribution to the book.

Always dimly aware of the family connection, Goodson learned of Ball's investigations through a newspaper article and radio broadcast. "What really drew me to him was the fact that . . . he didn't understand why he was doing this," says Goodson. She believed she did.

"I told him," she says, "that I knew why . . . : Because someone at some point was going to have to somehow take some accountability for what has happened to us as a people. And I thought that God was using him to bring some healing."

And she wrote to him: "I feel a very strong connection to you. Our lives have touched, and we are no strangers to each other. . . . I hope you will be able to help me as I am willing to help you."

Eventually, Ball brought the Smalls family evidence of their connection through Frederick Poyas. Frederick was the son of James Poyas, a great-great-great-grandson of Elias "Red Cap" Ball, and the slave Diana, Goodson's great-great-great-grandmother.

Over time, Ball's visits with Goodson, in New York and Philadelphia, deepened into a friendship. Even Leon Smalls, a truck driver who is portrayed in the book as profoundly pessimistic about race relations, says, "A lot of positive things . . . came out of it."

Now, Goodson, an ebullient personality who has taken drama classes, says she dreams of starring in the movie that she hopes will be made from the book. "Honey, I could be a slave," she insists. "I would love to be my three-time great-grandmother."

And who, pray tell, would she like to see playing opposite her as James Poyas?

"I wish it was Ed Ball," she says, bursting into warm laughter.