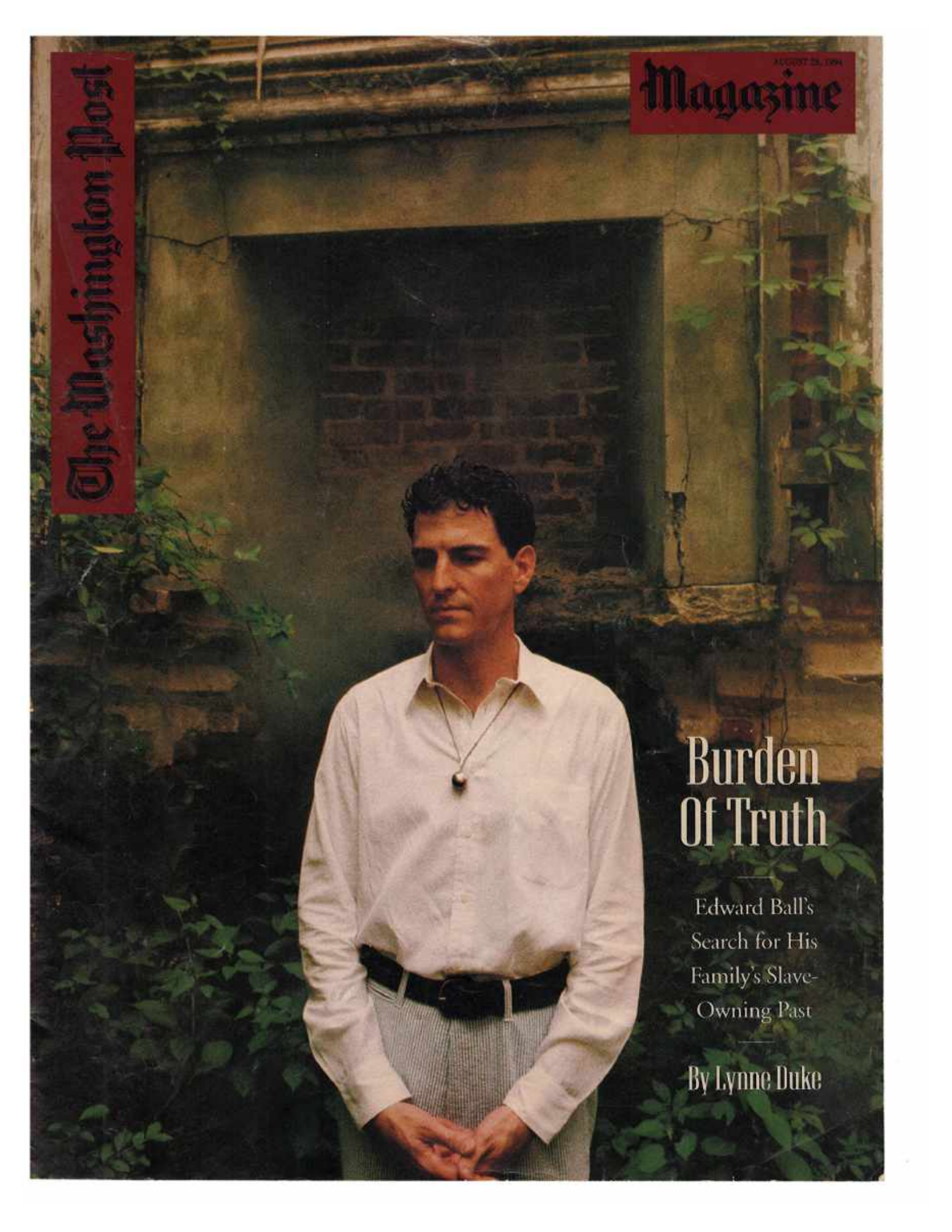


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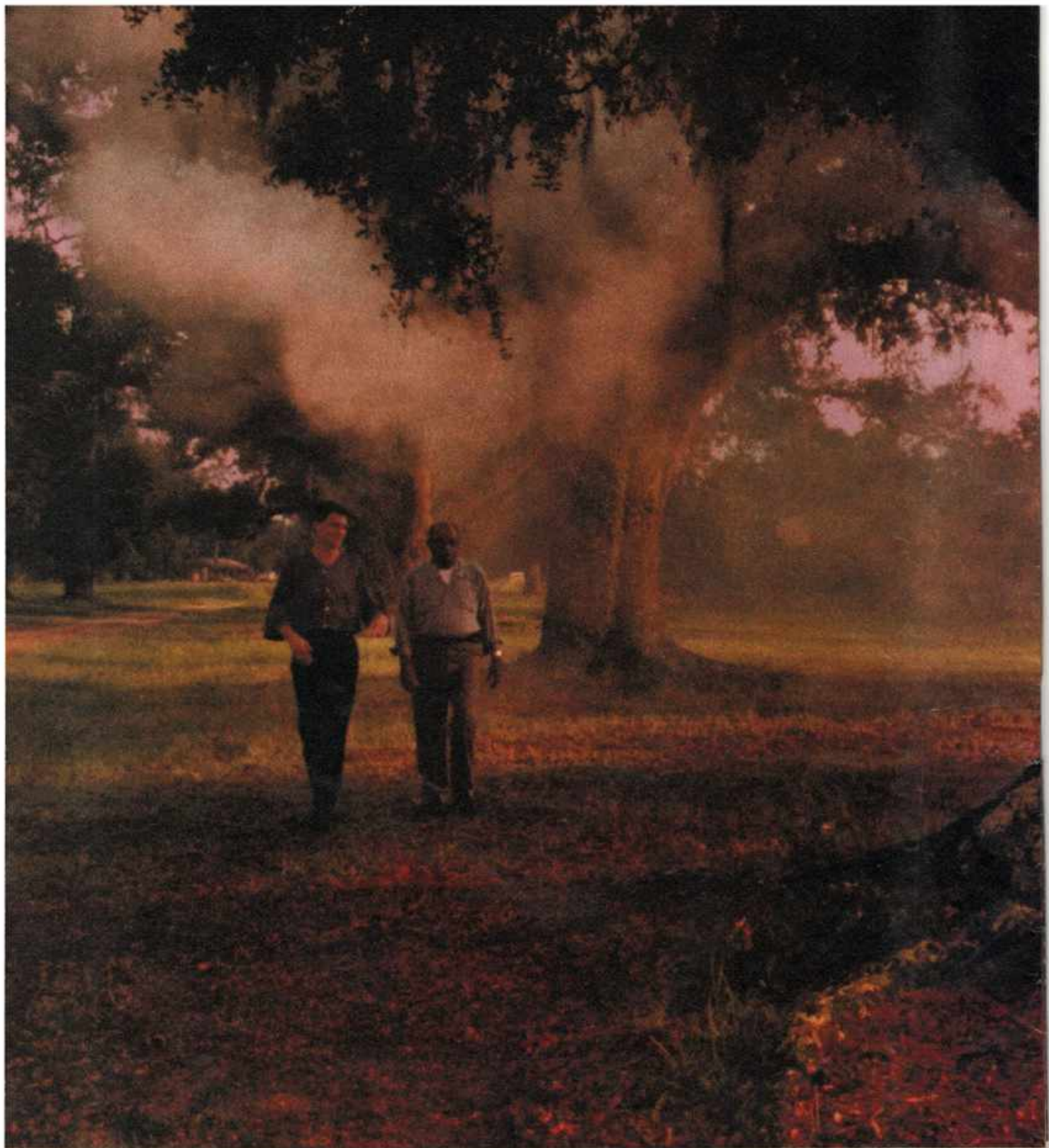
The Washington Post

A man with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved button-down shirt, a dark belt, and light-colored striped trousers, stands in front of a brick wall. He has his hands clasped in front of him and is looking slightly to the left. The wall behind him is partially covered in green vines. The overall tone is somber and historical.

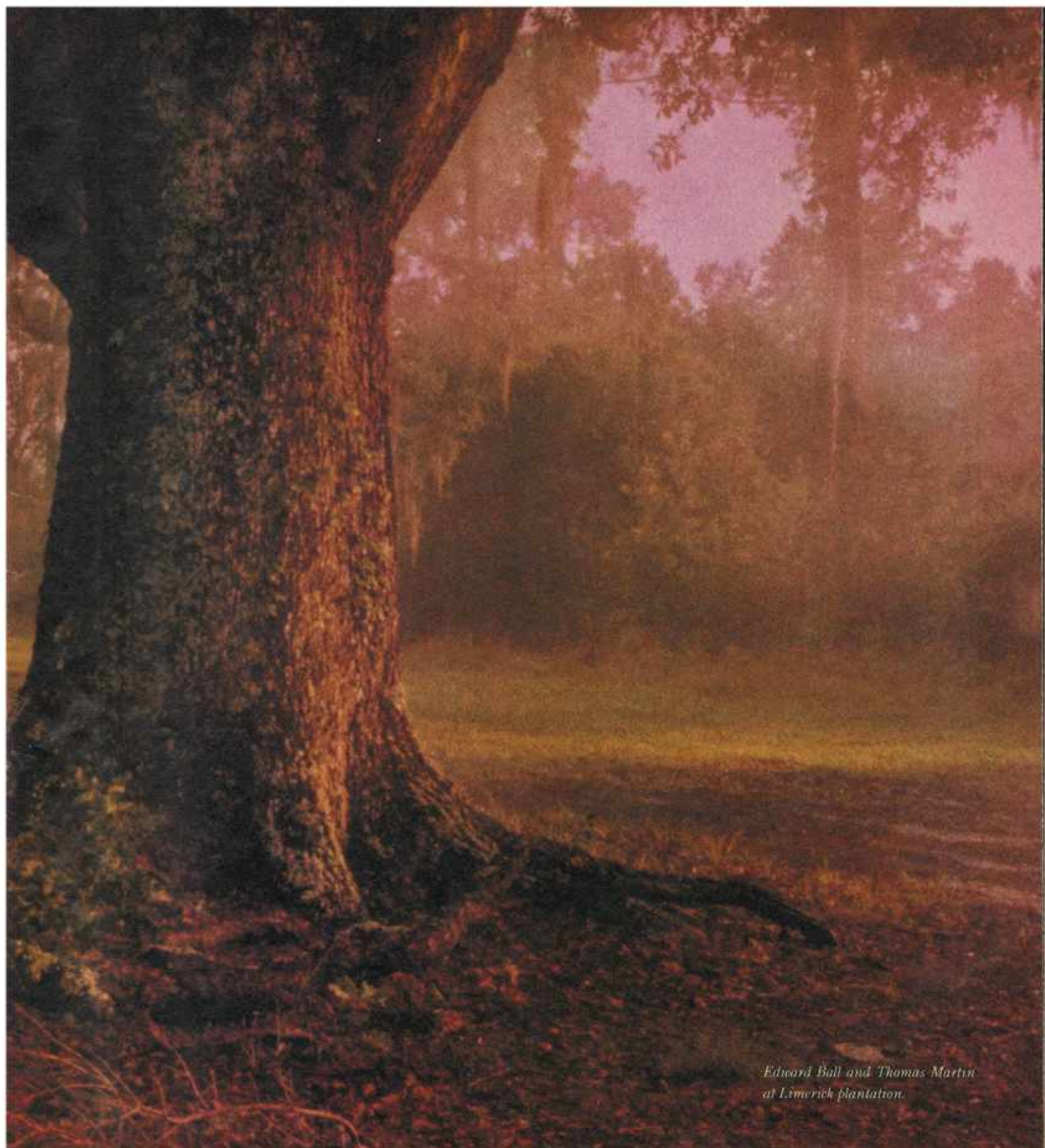
Burden Of Truth

Edward Ball's
Search for His
Family's Slave-
Owning Past

By Lynne Duke



This Harrowed Ground



*Edward Ball and Thomas Martin
at Limerick plantation.*

Edward Ball, descendant of slaveholders, is seeking out descendants of the slaves his ancestors owned. He hopes to unearth the truth about his family's past—and spark a cross-racial dialogue about the ugliest chapter in American history ✱ BY LYNNE DUKE PHOTOGRAPHS BY D. GORTON

The little white boy rode in the back seat of the big car, staring out the window and watching the wide world glide by. There were

marshes and creeks, wooden shacks on dirt roads, and "Negroes" moving to and fro, living hardscrabble in the summer swelter of the South Carolina Low Country.

Nine-year-old Edward Ball had never been to this part of the state, and what he saw that day in 1967—as his father, the Rev. Porter Ball, wheeled the family Pontiac 30 miles up the Cooper River from Charleston and into Berkeley County—seemed foreign to him.

His father, a Charlestonian who moved about the South on a succession of Episcopal parish assignments, wanted Ed and his 11-year-old brother, Ted, to see the church where generations of Balls had worshipped. Called Strawberry Chapel, it is a small, austere structure surrounded by moss-draped oaks, with an adjacent cemetery of ancient headstones and above-ground tombs. The early line of Balls is interred there, among them Elias "Red Cap" Ball, who arrived in the Carolina colony from England in 1698 to claim his inheritance from a half-uncle: a 2,000-acre portion of a plantation called Comingtee.

In the 167 years that followed the first Ball's arrival, the ever-growing Ball clan amassed a dozen plantations along the Cooper, where thousands of their slaves worked the fields. The family grew the rice that came to be known as "Carolina gold," and indeed it made the Balls rich, like the rest of the region's planter aristocracy.

Theirs was, so Ball family lore goes, a culture of gentility and paternalism. The slaves were cared for with benevolence, and bonds of trust and faithfulness cemented the master-servant relationship. With only passing reference to the immorality of slavery, this idyllic description of plantation life was passed down from generation to generation; the Rev. Ball heard it from his grandfather, Isaac Ball, a Confederate veteran in whose home he grew up.

But that day in 1967, with his two young sons in tow, the reverend did not show off any of the family's former plantations. He told the boys nothing of the planters' glory, nor of the Balls and their slaves. Wearing a white suit and his cleric's collar, he showed his sons only the chapel, home of his faith.

Their father then drove a few miles away to visit an old family servant, a black man whom Ed remembers as "George." He left Ed and Ted in the car, then pointed at them once from the wooden porch where he stood with George. The boys waved back politely when the gray-haired George raised his hand in silent greeting. The visit lasted far beyond the promised five minutes, and then the Rev. Ball emerged from the shack, rejoined his fidgety sons in the car, and headed back to town.

Ed never learned why his father seemed moved by the visit. Nor did he understand why he and his brother were not introduced to George. And the relationship between George and the Ball family remained a mystery. A quiet man, his father seemed unusually withdrawn as he drove back to Charleston.

But there were other times when the Rev. Ball would talk of his family. He sometimes poked affectionate fun at what Ed today calls the Balls' "extreme formality" and "brittle etiquette." And throughout Ed's childhood he remembers his father playfully

mocking the Balls' deep decorum. "There are five things we do not discuss in the Ball family," his father would declare. "Sex, money, religion, death and the Negroes."

THEY WERE WORDS spoken in jest—or partly in jest—yet Edward Ball has discovered their truth. There were many things about "the Negroes" that the Balls never knew, never wanted to know, or, as Ed Ball puts it, "suppressed." In the Ball version of history, which includes both printed and oral accounts, there were no unhappy slaves, no injured slaves, no slaves who hated their condition—only loyal, affectionate slaves who "were always well fed, well clothed and well treated," according to a 1909 family memoir. The Balls' collective silence about the horror of slavery held for more than a century after the last Ball slave was freed.

But slowly and quite painfully for some, that silence is being broken. As some members of his family nervously await the outcome of his research, Ed Ball, now 35 and living in New York, has returned to the Low Country and begun sifting through the past. He is searching for the descendants of his family's slaves, with the aim of gathering their stories, understanding their heritage, telling a history of the Ball plantations that no one in his family has told. This fall, he will take up residence in Charleston. He will comb archival records and begin constructing slave genealogies.

It is a task of epic proportions, one that will ultimately produce a book. But already the project has had deep personal consequences. For, as Ball wades into the past, he has had to untangle and understand what is driving him. And he is grappling with a broader question too: the extent to which any white American can reconcile himself to and be accountable for a pained past that haunts us still.

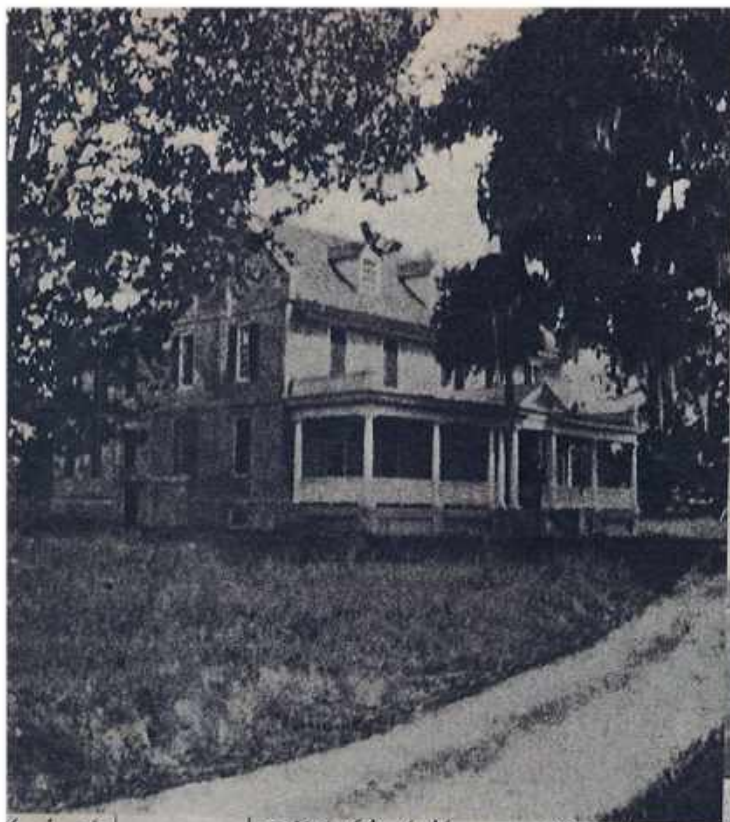
What his family did to their slaves and how those slaves were affected is not a distant occurrence, Ed Ball believes, but one that "continues to speak in the present," and to resonate not only in the souls of the descendants on both sides, but in other forms, in other families, at the core of this thing called "whiteness," at the very core of America. "It's the mother of us all, this story," Ed Ball says.

So it has become, for now, his life's work. He is poring through the volumes of records meticulously kept by his family since 1700, which are housed at universities and archives in the Carolinas. He is searching through the documents of the Freedmen's Bureau at the National Archives in Washington. He is learning the art of genealogical research as he goes, with the help of the New York chapter of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, which has embraced this oddity—a white man tracing black history; a descendant of masters trying to reach out to the descendants of slaves.

Ball so far has found four families whose ancestors were slaves on Ball plantations. In each case, family members spoke with Ball and shared with him their oral histories. They told stories of the maltreatment of slaves, of families separated in sale and of the general brutality of bondage. Earlier this year, some of those accounts were featured on a radio program narrated by Ball, and what the slave descendants had to say hit the Ball clan heavily.

The Balls have prided themselves on the ancestral image of compassion, emphasizing that masters tried as best they could not to separate slave families in sale; that no Ball masters perpetrated

Clockwise from top left: Comingtee plantation, the first Ball plantation in South Carolina, named for English settler John Coming; "Maum Mary," who is described in South Carolina Historical Society records as the nurse of a family at Comingtee; P.H. Martin and his wife, whose name is unknown, and their seven children; Isaac Ball, Ed Ball's great-grandfather; a list of slaves at four Ball plantations around 1808. Many of the slaves in the Low Country of South Carolina were given classical names such as Brutus, Nero, Hector, Diana, Jupiter and Juno.



Winington
London
Cipio
Armina
Mary
Birney
William
Hillippe
Hale
Cesar
Hammon
Apud
Peter
Monemica
De
Mary
Annah
Boy
Leon
Joseph
Benjamin
Linco
Mellary
Stine
Monica
Ter
Aracia
Doctor
Jenny
Abin
Mah
oda
Orphary
 32

Hyde Park Negroes - 2^d Continued

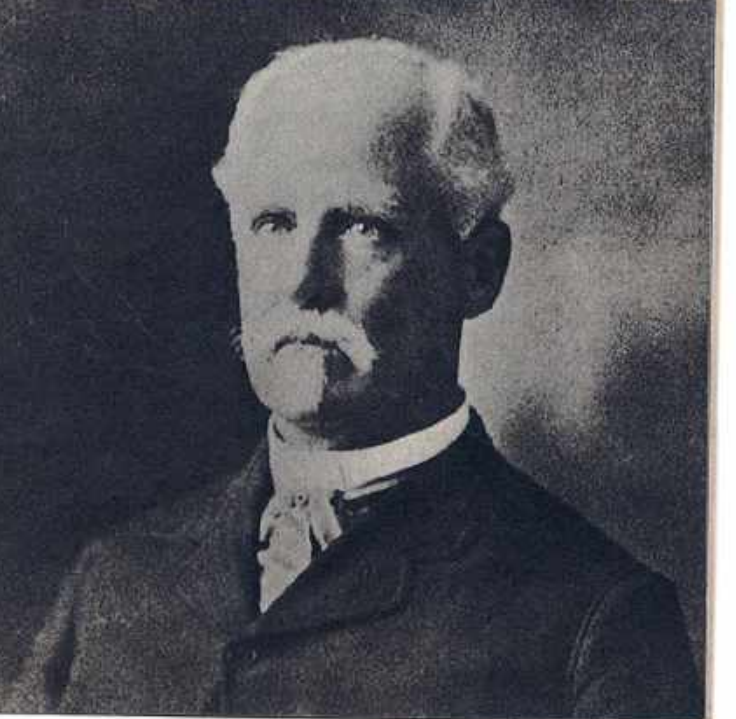
Casa	Ed Sampson	Mary Tomm
Nero	Tenang	Frank
Misbe	Allich	Peggy
Jack	Stoke	Ed Peter
Yd Neo	Tarrow	Padro
Hamut	Phillis	Moses
Pepp	Comes	
Labey	Jupiter	Nancy / B. B. White
Hoke	Marshall	Jibby / B. B. White
by Peter	Amos	
Lucy	Diana	
Hora	Juno	8
Tora	Liza	30
John	Celia	30
Marian	Tommy	
Antus	Nancy	
Quaco	Hannah	
Homas	Deborah	
October	Polly	
Friday	Abraam	
Hampton	Scilly	
Joe	Issac	
Ben	Betty Leve	
Whitfield	Bella	
	Viola	
	Phyllander	
	Belia	
	Scipio	
	Amey	
	Jackey	
	Guy	
	Charles	
	York	
	Cotto	
	Mira	
	Doc Tomm	
	Lacey D.	

Note the names with marks these were born since 1862-1863

See number not to be returned for sale

158 No 86 507
17 1/2 James
21 History
 322

W. H. Jones
Joe English 17





Fredie Mae and Postal Smalls, a part-time groundskeeper at a refurbished former Ball plantation.

violence or engaged in master-slave sex. Ed Ball's research is viewed by some family members, especially the elderly ones, as a threat to these long-held beliefs. Some would prefer not to know too many details about their ancestors' slave practices, one relative says.

"They don't know where it's going," says one of Ed's cousins, Charlotte Ball Vogelsang. "They don't understand it. It's scary to them, I think. They're afraid that they won't be understood, because they really believe that we really were as good as they got as slave masters."

What's worse—from the Ball point of view, at least—Ed Ball has done more than simply locate these slave descendants with the hope of hearing their stories. He has also said to them: I am sorry.

It is an awkward thing to do, this attempt to throw three words against the weight of a history. The apology was part of his radio program, and Ball remains somewhat embarrassed by the spectacle of it. Even though his mother, brother and a few other relatives believe the apology had a healing effect, Ball has decided in retrospect that his words were "arrogant" and "inadequate" and something he won't repeat. But the sentiment, now unspoken, lives within him.

JUST AS ED BALL'S quest has no clearly defined ending point, it has no distinct beginning; it is driven by a fascination, a confusion that has been with him all his life, or certainly since that early car ride with his father. But his current effort was triggered by an es-

say that he wrote for the *Village Voice* in March of last year, "White Like Who?" It was this meditation on "whiteness," Ball says, that marks the genesis of his quest to revisit his family's history. Something about the exercise excited him, whetted his appetite for turning his own private soul-searching into a public discourse about race and history.

Ball is a professional writer. Before last year, though, he had written mostly at arm's length, never about himself or his family. For three years he contributed an architecture column to the *Voice*, and before that freelanced art and film criticism for a number of magazines. His interest in cultural signs and symbols is longstanding; he studied semiotics at Brown University as an undergraduate and cinema at the University of Iowa as a graduate student. The semiotician analyzes the ways, implicit and explicit, in which ideas are transmitted in media such as advertising and film. Now Ball is turning that analysis on himself, his family: ex-

ploring the nature of whiteness, what it signifies.

"Race is a masquerade; we are its players," he writes in the *Voice* essay. "Whiteness speaks through me like a ventriloquist, as it does through you, I think, whatever your color." He writes of his realization that whiteness is not the norm, but "might be an 'other' thing, as unto itself as blackness," and not "simply there, like the atmosphere, as unconscious as the intake of breath." He describes the irony of whiteness: that without the "other," there would be nothing to distinguish whiteness, that white people "don't exist. Until they come up against difference."

"Whether whiteness is a thing to laugh or cry about is undecidable," he writes, but it is there, all over him, literally in him, communicated to him by generations of Balls, their stories of the Low Country, their pride in Ball ancestry. This is the essence of what Ed Ball calls "deep local whiteness," which, he concludes unhappily, "was imprinted in me, and it was indelible."

Elaborating on those year-old ruminations, Ball said recently that whiteness is not a skin color so much as a mind-set, "a thing that is in society . . . a set of signs, a language."

"I'm interested to look at whiteness as carefully as white people look at blackness. As a white person, I'm interested to understand how my ethnicity has produced me as an individual . . . and how whiteness produces the majority experience of Americans. My plantation research might be a way for me to do this intellectually as a writer."

How did Ed Ball become so fascinated with racial self-analysis, an arena rarely entered by whites? He considers the question dur-

Even now, Ball is uncertain of himself and his motives.

After he was attacked in print, he says, 'I couldn't do anything for a couple of weeks. Was I causing more pain than healing? Was this somebody else's history, not mine? Should I just stop and let black people do their own history?'

ing an interview at a Washington restaurant. Despite his flight from the South, there is still a certain Southernness to him, a courtly, formal, almost anachronistic air. A hint of old-English theatricality pervades his speech, with verbs such as "forbade" and "despaired" thrown in where more modern colloquialisms would do. His tone grows incredulous when asked how he became aware of whiteness.

"How can you not be that way in this country? This country is based on an incredibly painful dialectic of blackness and whiteness. That's what's the machine of this country . . . How can you not be aware of that at every moment?"

IN JUNE OF LAST YEAR, not long after the *Voice* essay was published, the Ball family held a large reunion in Charleston. For Ball, the event seemed a perfect opportunity to develop his ideas further, hone his understanding. He knew the reunion would present the same portrait of the Ball clan that he'd encountered all his life: one of Southern gentility, with little said about slaveholding save for the bonds of affection it created.

Still seeking a public forum for this examination—"I'm a writer and writers do their sort of interrogation in a public way"—Ball contacted National Public Radio and suggested a piece based on the differing histories that blacks and whites could tell of the same Ball plantations. His idea was to attend the reunion and record interviews with older family members, then track down descendants from the slave side. NPR bought the idea.

The Ball family did not. The Balls didn't want their private event to become a public one. "Fools' names and fools' faces can be seen in public places," an elderly relative tut-tutted to him.

Forbidden to record the events, Ball went to the reunion anyway. About 150 Ball relatives converged on Charleston to commemorate the arrival of "Red Cap" Ball nearly 300 years ago. They shared family remembrances at cocktail parties. They attended genealogy lectures at Charles Towne Landing State Park, site of the 1670 landing of the first English settlers—whose numbers included John Coming, Red Cap's half-uncle and the man for whom Comingtee plantation was named.

They toured the Cooper River, where the ruins or restorations of a few old Ball plantations still could be seen. Ball plantation homes, like many others in the Low Country, were modestly sized and utilitarian in architecture, not the grand mansions of other regions. Ball slave owners lived in these homes only part of the year, owing to the malaria outbreaks that flourished in the summer months. The last Ball plantation was sold out of the family earlier this year. While the family remains affluent, its antebellum wealth went the way of the Confederacy.

Family members at the reunion also went to Strawberry Chapel for a service memorializing the dead. After prayers in the chapel, the priest brought out the silver chalices, paten and alms plates that have been the chapel's Communion ser-

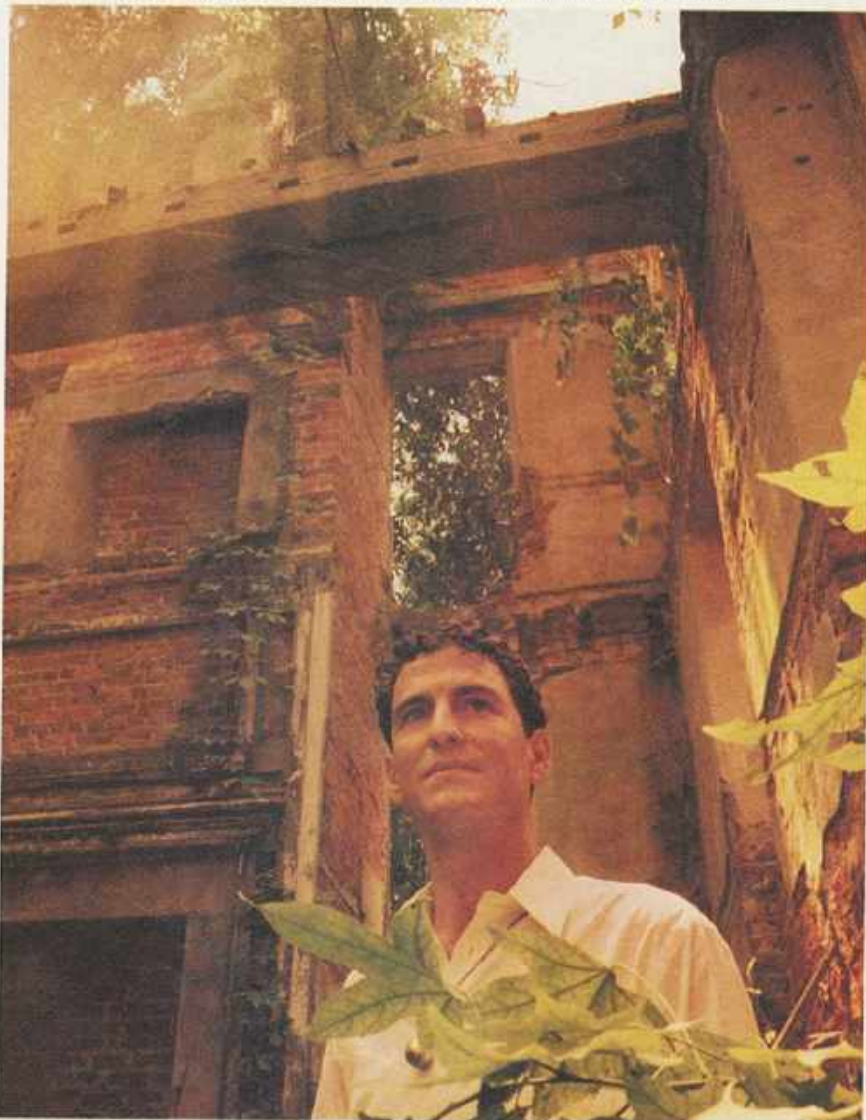
vice since the Revolutionary War period. The silver is a testament to Ball longevity. During the Civil War, Keating Ball and a slave named Friday buried the silver beneath Comingtee's rice mill, to save it from Union sympathizers marauding through the Charleston region while Sherman marched on Columbia farther inland. Unfortunately, no one could find it again. The silver remained lost to the family until the 1940s, when metal detectors were brought in to locate it.

The Ball history is filled with such stories, which were told and retold during the reunion. Ed Ball describes the event as "a kind of indoctrination seminar"; he describes as pernicious the nostalgia that some whites have about the old South. His feelings about his family are mixed, to say the least: During one interview, displaying the Ball coat of arms, he comments sarcastically that "a family with airs has a coat of arms." Showing pictures of Ball ancestors, he describes one woman as looking "kind of constipated." Turning to another, he refers to "this glowering countenance here."

Ball says his attitude toward his background is one not of disparagement but of irony. "I'm very curious about it," he says, but "for personal reasons, I have to counter the unequivocal enthusiasm I hear from so many relatives about the family story."

At the reunion, while he was recon- *continued on page 20*

Edward Ball at Comingtee plantation on the Cooper River outside Charleston.



BALL

continued from page 13

necting with relatives he had not seen in several years, he also was trying to absorb as much information as he could. There was plenty to be had; reunion planners had prepared packets for each guest, much like the ones handed out at professional conferences. Included was genealogical data on the Balls, histories of the plantations and the rice crop, and information about certain favored slaves.

Included also were three letters from a former slave. The letters are addressed to an ex-master and express continued devotion to the Ball name. It was these letters that sparked the next phase of Ed's search.

"DEAR MAS ISAAC," the 1926 letter begins. "Mrs. Richardson up here told me that your wife has pass away . . . There are no white people that I can regard more than I do the Balls."

So wrote P. Henry Martin, a man about whom little can be known from the letters save that he was a slave or a son of a slave. The letter was addressed to Isaac Ball, Ed Ball's great-grandfather, a Confederate veteran at the end of a long line of Ball masters. Apparently late in life, P. Henry Martin ended up in a small town upcountry. He wrote to the Ball family not only to extend condolences, but also to ask "Mas Isaac" to send books. And repeatedly, he emphasized his esteem for the Ball family.

"Well Mas Isaac, I am up here in Sumter County . . . but there are no people like those on the coast, our white people, our old masters and their children. My father's people were never free and they were never slaves so far as the word slave may mean . . ."

The letter had been culled, for the reunion, from the voluminous collection of Ball plantation records—among the most extensive in the South. The collection spans the period from about 1700 to 1890 and is held at the Perkins Library at Duke University in Durham, N.C., the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, and at the South Carolina Historical Society in Charleston. It includes the deeds of sale and contracts for purchase of slaves, contracts for the rental of slaves, probate records, property assessments, ledgers on blankets and cloth distributed to slaves and sharecropper contracts with former slaves.

These last items are particularly important: As genealogical tools in slave research, sharecropping contracts are invaluable because they list—for the first time—the surnames that former slaves took at Emancipation. (Slaves generally were not allowed surnames.) After the Ball

reunion, combing the historical society archives in Charleston, Ed Ball found such a document listing 40 surnames of former slaves who in 1866 signed a contract to become sharecroppers at Comingtee.

Aiken and Ash, Gadders and Gainey, Wigfall and Withers: These were among the surnames on the contract. Using a shotgun approach, Ball wrote to hundreds of similarly named people listed in Charleston-area telephone directories in late 1993. No one answered.

So Ball turned to the "Mas Isaac" letters and the few slender clues they offered. The 1926 letter was postmarked from Pine-wood, S.C. "I looked at the postmark, got the phone books for this little town, Pine-wood. There were only a few Martins," says Ball; it wouldn't be difficult to simply telephone them all.

Not difficult—except for the fact that the prospect of making these blind phone calls terrified Ed, as his girlfriend, Lucinda Rosenfeld, recalls. "Honestly, I wouldn't blame him because it's terrifying . . . the idea of him calling as a direct descendant saying, 'Excuse me, but were your people slaves to my ancestors?' or 'Hi, I'm Edward Ball. Were your people slaves on the Ball plantations?'"

So Rosenfeld, a fiction writer, took up the challenge. "She called some of the Martin families and told each of them the story," Ball says. Rosenfeld told the families that she hoped to find information about the plantations of Berkeley County for a radio program. "Then I said, 'Forgive me. May I ask you a few questions? Do you mind me asking if you had any ancestors that worked on plantations in Berkeley County?'"

Unfortunately, none of those families registered any memory of P.H. Martin. "So then I looked at some other correspondence and found a letter from P.H. Martin dated seven years later, 1933, from another little town," Ed Ball recalls. The town was Pinopolis, near Monck's Corner, in Berkeley County, "and I got the phone books for that town and there were about 60 Martins and I despaired. But . . . Lucinda did not." Instead, she again picked up the phone.

"She made the first call. Didn't work. She made the second phone call and said, after telling the story, 'Do you have anyone in your ancestry named Peter Henry Martin?' And the woman said, 'You mean P.H.?' And—amazing! There was the Martin family. And this woman . . . led me to Thomas Martin."

Martin, the grandson of P.H. Martin, was the first direct slave descendant Ed Ball found. In the weeks to come, he would find others.

One of these, Georgina Richardson, he located only after going door-to-door in the deep country of Berkeley County where

the elderly African Americans still speak in the clipped Gullah dialect that emerged among Africans when they were brought to America. The 84-year-old woman's grandparents and a great-aunt had been slaves at Comingtee, and she could remember the names of former Comingtee slaves she had known.

Fredie Mae Smalls, 71, was found through word of mouth: Her husband, Postal Smalls, 74, works as a part-time groundskeeper at a refurbished plantation house the Balls owned after the Civil War, and whose current owners are acquaintances of one of Ed Ball's cousins. Mrs. Smalls said that the Balls bought her great-great-grandmother from a slave ship.

The oldest of the descendants and the one with the most information was Emily Frayer, 93. Her daughter wrote to Ball after seeing a letter published last January in the *Chronicle*, a black Charleston newspaper, in which he appealed for information from people with ancestral links to Ball plantations. Frayer's grandparents had been slaves on the Limerick plantation, another Ball holding, and her family, like Ball's, had kept as much history as possible.

Frayer shared what she knew—as did the other descendants—telling Ball stories of the plantations and even visiting one with him. But for Frayer, that initial openness had ended. When contacted for this article, Frayer's daughter, Luzina King, would not discuss Ball and his research, saying only, "We don't know how we feel about it."

AS IT HAPPENED, Ed Ball wasn't the only person with a powerful interest in the true history of Ball slaves. Thomas Martin, 61, a former high school assistant principal, had turned in his retirement to the pursuit of his roots—namely the life of P.H. Martin. So Martin greeted with glee the news that someone with information about his grandfather had been calling around to Martin families. Then one day, Ed Ball himself was on the phone.

"He told me that he was interested in doing some research and he understood that my grandfather was a slave on a Ball plantation and 'I'd like to talk to you about him.' And I said, 'Oh my goodness! I've just started doing a genealogy, and I really would like to talk with you.'"

When they met last February, Ball came equipped with radio broadcast gear to record the event. "He was quite a gentleman," says Martin, seated in his den, where bookshelves sag with the weight of encyclopedia sets and walls are covered with family photos, including one of P.H. Martin. "In fact, as a thank-you gesture he sent me a can of Wisconsin honey, which I haven't used because I've got diabetes. But it sort of moved me that he came. I had mixed emotions, though. Here is a white person

trying to find out information about black people. And I guess the question that came to my mind was: What is he getting out of it? . . . And I guess I was a little selfish: What is it that's in there for me, as far as not monetary, but as far as helping me to find information about my grandfather."

He did not feel any animosity toward Ball. And his initial suspicions became secondary in the face of the exciting possibility that the letters could tell him new things about his grandfather. He already knew from Berkeley County oral histories of the 19th century that P.H. Martin had established a school for children. The letters told him much more: that P.H. Martin had some schooling, that he learned to write well despite restrictions on education, that he valued books and that he maintained bonds with his former masters—albeit bonds that the modern-day Martin finds difficult to understand.

Indeed, the most perplexing moment of the visit with Ed Ball came as they discussed the substance of P.H. Martin's letters, the deference and affection conveyed to the former master. In one letter, the former slave even goes so far as to declare, "As long as there are Balls, I will have mistresses and masters."

Thomas Martin grimaces as he repeats that phrase. "Even after he got his freedom he kept saying, 'You'll always be my master.' I mean, maybe he didn't know what freedom even meant," Martin says.

Martin recalls Ball asking him what he thought of P.H. Martin's professed devotion. "And I said I thought he was well loved by the family, or he loved the family." Then Ball asked, "Or an Uncle Tom?"

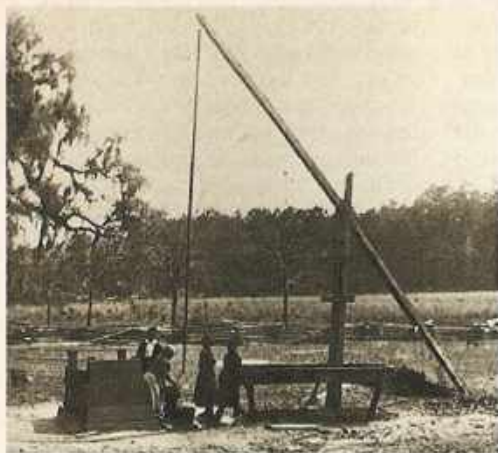
The suggestion took Martin by surprise. It did not anger him or sadden him, just added a wrinkle to the picture of his grandfather that slowly was emerging. But mostly, Martin says, he is just "so glad" to have the letters. Connections to a past, however imperfect.

Martin did not feel anything historically profound occurred that day. Yes, the new information about his grandfather advanced his research. But he responded to Ball as he would respond to any other white person, he says. No differently.

Ball, on the other hand, literally grows misty-eyed when he recalls the Martin visit. The visit seemed to him like two histories coming together, with some part of an unresolved past being expressed in the present.

"Martin Luther King predicted that this would happen," Ball says. "You might remember, at the end of the speech in 1963 on the Mall in Washington, there was a cadence in which he said, 'I have a dream that one day the sons of slaves and the sons of slave owners will sit down at the table of brotherhood.'"

"Although when I started to do this I



'I mean, those plantations were not some sideshow,' Ball says. 'This was the trunk of American history, from which the current society has grown.'

Drawing water from the old crane well at Comingtee.

wasn't thinking about King and hadn't even remembered that [speech], it does resonate . . . I think there's some sort of historical and moral charge to the times when I meet people like Mr. Martin. I mean, these plantations were not some sideshow. This was the trunk of American history, from which the current society has grown. And I think that weight presses itself on me when I meet people like Mr. Martin."

"OF THE GALL, Massa Ball!"

That headline screamed out from the black-oriented City Sun newspaper in New York last February, the same month that Ball visited Martin. Under the headline was a scathing attack on Ed Ball's slave research, penned by Stefani Zinerman, one of the paper's editors and a black woman who deeply resented what Ball was attempting to do.

In the City Sun—as in the Chronicle in Charleston the month before—Ball had published an open letter explaining his project and appealing for help from readers with information about the Ball plantations. He opened and closed the short appeal with references to King's dream.

Though he explained his goal in the letter, his motives were not clearly stated. And Zinerman, like Martin, wondered about them. There was far less charity in her reaction. To her, a white man dabbling in slave histories must be deemed suspect, even dangerous, until proven otherwise.

"Now, 100-plus years later, you want to once again rape us for our resources," Zinerman wrote. She accused him of seeking "mammy" stories, of trying to exploit black people just as slave owners did. The pain that slavery inflicted, she added, was worse than the crimes of the Nazis. "Hitler exterminated bodies. Slave masters exterminated the spirit and the culture of a people," she wrote.

"I can assure you that you are not ready to hear, accept or understand the recollections of these stolen children of Africa. The saga of slavery cannot be discussed by

slave master and slave, even over a mint julep and a sincere 'I'm sorry' . . . Your effort to get the word out about your project has stirred up a sea of pain. We are awash with memories of our intellect being trampled and our spirits being torn from our chests. Be aware, Mr. Ball, this is an impossible dream."

This was the first negative reaction Ball had received from African Americans. Zinerman's response was so strong and so surprising that it paralyzed him. He still was grappling with his own evolving motives, and her attack made him second-guess his motives even more.

"I was upset. I couldn't do anything for a couple of weeks." Questions gripped him: "Was I causing more pain than healing? Was this somebody else's history, not mine? Was I an expropriator, as Stefani Zinerman accuses me of being? Should I just stop and let black people do their own history?"

Then he began to see Zinerman's response as a natural part of the public process he had set in motion: He'd have to be able to not only tell this story, but also take the criticism that might result. His willingness to face attacks such as Zinerman's, he realized, is part of what it means to present oneself as accountable for the part his family played in history.

"I'm not looking for 'mammy' stories . . . It's hurtful to hear someone accuse me of doing that, but I understand why she would find I'm a convenient target for her rage. That's why I'm talking about accountability. This is part of making an account, actually being able to talk to people and feel people's rage, and I expect I'm going to find that. I'm willing to entertain the question of whether my family was worse than the fascists. After reading this," he says of Zinerman's response, "it's the sense of what I mean by the historic charge, the ethical charge of my meeting with Thomas Martin."

Ball's published appeal elicited a different reaction from another reader. Antonia

Cottrell Martin, head of the New York chapter of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, read Ed Ball's City Sun letter and immediately was intrigued. She frequently tells her 80-odd virtually all-black membership that the records of slave owners are key to charting the African American genealogical map.

Genealogical research of the slave era has been the province primarily of African Americans at least since the 1970s, when the "Roots" rage was launched by the Alex Haley novel and the television miniseries of the same name. So Ed Ball's open letter marked a rare thing indeed, and Cottrell Martin thought she ought to make contact with him. "If he's got the nerve to write an article like that in the City Sun," she said, "then he's prepared to put himself out there."

"OUT THERE" HE WENT last March, when National Public Radio carried the voice of Ed Ball narrating the story of his ancestors and their slaves.

He led with the elderly Ball relatives, some of whom agreed to tape-recorded interviews after the reunion. Their stories and impressions—peppered with references to "darkies" and "nigras"—helped him understand the mentality of the masters and the plantation milieu. In the segment, Elias Ball Bull, now deceased, describes the isolation of the whites, deep in the malarial and marshy regions where the plantations flourished. Whites sometimes were outnumbered 10 to 1 by blacks, he says, and "may not see another white person for six months, and nobody they could associate with. Nobody . . . The poor white people were the ones that were very lonely there."

Another Ball relative, Dorothy Dame Gibbs, tells how one Ball slave owner played a trick on Yankee visitors who explored the ban on slave education. Like many other Low Country planters, the Ball master gave male slaves classical names; during the visit the master summoned a

slave named Scipio and had him recite the Latin poem "Carpe Diem." The Yankee visitors were duly impressed, even though Scipio "didn't have any more idea what he was talking about than I would know if I'd recited Sanskrit," Gibbs says with a chuckle. "Of course, it was a joke to Mr. Ball."

There is no criticism in her tone. Later in the program, she says that "my impression is that a good deal of consideration was given to the personal needs of slaves as people." She tells Ed Ball that it is her belief that the Ball masters were kind, engaged in very little brutality, did not break up families in sales, and had no interracial sex.

Ed Ball does not directly challenge those assertions. He simply leads his listeners into the oral histories of slave descendants.

Fredie Mae Smalls tells Ball, for example, that his ancestors were the ones who bought her ancestors from a slave ship. Smalls also challenges the notion that Ball masters eschewed miscegenation: "Matter of fact, they say—and I cannot prove it, now—they say that my great-granddaddy is Marie Ball's brother's son," she says on the radio.

Emily Frayer, who lives in Charleston, tells how her grandfather was sold from Limerick and sent to another Ball plantation.

"So on Limerick, your grandfather left a family and he moved to Stoney plantation and started another family?" Ed Ball asks.

Frayer quickly corrects him. "He didn't 'left.' They sold him, because they been selling you just like they could sell a chicken."

Repeating the oral history passed down to her, Frayer also tells of how the slaves at Limerick had to bury their dead at night "because they had to work in the day. So they ain't got time for burying no dead in the day . . . And my grandmother said you could hear the people screaming in the night, big fire light, burying the dead."

And then there is the story of Rachel and the whipping. Rachel, a slave, was Frayer's great-aunt. The story goes like this, in Frayer's broadcast words: The overseer attempted to discipline Rachel and she slapped him, sending him into a rage. "And he was so mad, the master step in and said, 'No, you cannot lick her, I lick Rachel myself,'" at which time the Ball master administered the whipping.

It is to Emily Frayer that Ed Ball apologizes, as the two of them tour the grounds of Hyde Park plantation. "You didn't have to come," Frayer says. "You'll mend many fences."

The two of them cry together, when Frayer finds the shack in which she was born.

BRUTALITY, SEX and separation: In less than 30 minutes, Ed Ball had presented to

the world a portrait of his ancestors that challenged the family lore. With that, his access to his relatives diminished. Before, Ed was family; now, says one cousin, his elderly kin perceive him as a journalist and therefore feel "guarded" toward him.

None of the older Balls would consent to be interviewed for this article. One of Ed Ball's cousins, Jeff Ball, 40, a real estate agent in Mount Pleasant, near Charleston, says the slave research has stirred up a hornet's nest in the family. Some relatives wonder, he says, if Ed Ball has an ax to grind. They think he "made the family look like the evil slave masters," says Jeff Ball. Says another cousin, Langhorne Ball, 46: "Some people thought he was trying to lay a guilt trip on us, that all the white people in the Ball family were horrible up until him."

The Balls do not want details of their slave-owning past to receive wide publicity, Jeff Ball explains. "They don't want to know about the descendants of the slaves. They don't want to turn those stones over." It's not that they are afraid of knowing; it's that they fear "ramifications." He will not elaborate for the record, but misinterpretation of historical detail could prove damaging, he says.

Take the story of Rachel's whipping. As portrayed on the radio, the account could leave the impression simply that the Ball masters did use violence. Jeff Ball says—and Ed Ball now concedes—that something more complicated may have been going on: that the overseer was so mad he likely would have beaten Rachel severely, perhaps even fatally, and that the Ball master's intervention was intended to protect Rachel from physical harm and "probably saved her life." Why? It's impossible to say for sure, but Jeff Ball suggests the master's concerns were practical.

"A good field hand in 1860 cost a thousand dollars. A thousand dollars in 1860 is a tremendous amount of money. It would be probably equal to \$20,000 today. You don't go out and beat a \$20,000 thoroughbred to death. It's an investment."

Personally, he says, he has no problem with Ed Ball's project, although he does not agree with the approach, particularly the fact that his cousin apologized for slavery. To Jeff Ball, that is a sure sign of Ed Ball's own feelings of guilt.

Slavery was legal in the 18th and 19th centuries, Jeff argues. While he abhors the idea of it, he cannot condemn his ancestors. When someone asks him, "Don't you feel bad because your ancestors owned slaves?" his response is, "No, I don't feel bad because my ancestors owned slaves. I mean, get over it."

"If Ed wants to go around and apologize, Ed's free to go around and apologize. But quite frankly, Ed didn't own any slaves. He isn't responsible for slavery or anybody's misfortunes," he says.

But Ed's apology produced positive reactions as well. Janet and Ted Ball, Ed's mother and brother, both were moved by the radio program: "I was crying too," says Janet Ball, who was listening from New Orleans. Since the broadcast, she has replayed the program maybe 20 times. "I can recite it," she says. "Oh yes, I love it."

Ted Ball, 37, of Baton Rouge, says he whispered a private "thank you" to his little brother as he listened. He feels grateful to Ed "for doing the hard work it took to get to the apology."

Their cousin Charlotte Ball Vogelsang listened and felt proud even though she does not know Ed Ball well. Like Ed, Vogelsang, 39, is the child of an Episcopal priest, a cousin of Ed's father. She too now lives in the North, in Buffalo. And just as Ed feels a strong connection between his family history and his views on race, so too does Vogelsang.

She lives in an integrated neighborhood and has black friends. Her children attend integrated public schools. And she serves on a church committee working on racial healing. Being a descendant of slave owners "puts me in the game. I'm one of the players . . . I can't say, 'Oh well, we never owned slaves. That's somebody else's problem.'" In the search for racial harmony, she says, "I'm one of the bad guys. I came from one of the bad guys. And it doesn't mean we're villains. We can get beyond this. I'm very hopeful."

Asked if she means she feels burdened because of her ancestry, she says, "I would not use the word burden, but a 'special responsibility.'"

BETWEEN 1800 AND 1865, nearly 3,000 babies were born into slavery on Ball plantations. The number from the previous century likely would be similar, although Ed Ball has yet to pin that down. Records also show, he says, that by the end of the Civil War, Ball slaves numbered roughly 1,500. Based on the growth rate of the general black population since then, Ball estimates that the number of African Americans with links to the 12 Ball plantations could be as high as 11,000.

He will, of course, find far fewer than that number. He need not reach them all to accomplish his goal, which is to produce a book sometime in the next two years. But knowing the depth of his family's slaving—"I had no idea of the scale of it"—and its reverberations into the modern era has propelled Ball in his journey.

His motives remain unclear, even to himself. The explanations he proffers range from the practical—he is doing what writers do—to the spiritual. He is not a religious man, he explains, and did not follow his father into the church, but "part of the church stays with me, and Christian teachings," especially about the equality of men.

Within the family, other theories have been suggested. Some Balls believe that Ed is extra-sensitive about the family because of the manner of his father's death. (Suffering from a terminal brain tumor, the Rev. Ball committed suicide when Ed was 12). But Ed's mother cannot pinpoint any episode that might have telegraphed her son's future direction. His brother assumes that Ed is simply doing what he feels is right.

And that means being accountable. It means airing the issue in public, standing up, taking criticism—testifying. In April, Ed Ball spoke at the annual national meeting of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, held at the District's Howard University Hotel. His opening comments were about Emily Frayer and their common fascination with their ancestors. "But self-conscious doting on our forefathers isn't the only thing that Mrs. Frayer and I have in common," he said. "Mrs. Frayer's ancestors were in slavery to my ancestors. It makes my white skin crawl to announce this. Yet however perverse this fact, it is nevertheless a common American relationship."

This is Ed Ball being accountable, "trying to answer for what occurred."

But how much can one man account for? How much can one man accomplish? Can Ed Ball help spark the kind of genuine cross-racial dialogue—a mutual healing, a mutual examination of history—that Americans find so difficult? Is he some kind of hero, or are his motivations more complex, more self-serving? Or both? And where does all this end? Those questions are larger than Ed Ball. And yet he has chosen, in his own way, to take them on, to carve out a zone of reconciliation between himself and his family's history; between the whiteness that is in him and the blackness that society has made the "other."

He has learned certain lessons along the way. Apologizing to Frayer may have seemed natural at the time, but it demonstrated to Ball his own capacity to act in an arrogant and self-serving manner. He also realizes, now—in a way he did not when he started—the bitter vigor of the debate over American history: who owns it, who gets to interpret it and how. That is the core of the tension between him and his elderly relatives. It may also underlie the response of Stefani Zinerman, from whom Ball learned that among some African Americans there is a fierce sense of proprietorship over the history of slavery. Whatever kind of white man Ed Ball may think he is or is trying to be, he has learned that he must also be concerned about what kind of white man others perceive him to be. That is one reason he has decided that the profits from his book—should there be any—will not be his alone.

These days, Ball is apprehensive about putting too grandiose a spin on his own mo-

tivations. He offers the idea of reconciliation, then takes it back the next day as "kind of presumptuous."

He offers redemption—personal redemption, and the redeeming of a history lost—then backpedals from that as well, calling the idea too large. Perhaps a better way of putting it is that he hopes his work will offset in some small way the pain of history, push it back, hold it at bay.

"It's about me personally trying to find some way as a white person, quite apart from my family's history, to acknowledge what's happened in this country. I mean, during the time that English-speaking people have been in this country, for more years were black people enslaved than not enslaved."

"I'm trying to understand how my own identity is connected to catastrophic events of the past in American history—slavery. And rather than merely acknowledging that fact and mourning it . . . I'm trying to act on that component of my identity and transform it, I guess, make use of it in a way that's productive."

And he is propelled too by memories he just can't shake.

As a boy, Ed Ball played on the pristine sand beaches of a place called Sullivan's Island, a thin strip of land at the mouth of Charleston Harbor. The Rev. Ball had moved his family there while he attempted a futile recovery from brain surgery. The island is a quiet summer retreat for Charlestonians and others, but its history is long and busy.

Pirates plundering ships around Charleston Harbor knew the little island well, and later it became a military installation called Fort Moultrie, which dates to the Revolutionary War. The Confederate attack on the federal garrison at Fort Sumter that started the Civil War was launched from Sullivan's. Edgar Allan Poe was among the more famous soldiers stationed there. But Fort Moultrie's flag came down for the last time after World War II, leaving its abandoned bunkers and artillery platforms a perfect playground for boys like Ed and Ted.

Sometimes as he dug in the sand or collected shells, Ed would find bones. They likely were bones from seagulls or someone's chicken lunch. But his childhood imagination would run wild with the thought that the bones could be human.

There was no reason for him to know, then, that Sullivan's Island had been like an Ellis Island for African America, that perhaps 40 percent of the slaves imported to Colonial America passed through the island for quarantine. He had no reason to know that those who died were dumped in the sea or buried in mass graves in the sandy earth. There was no reason for him to know these things, then. But now, Ed Ball feels he must. ■