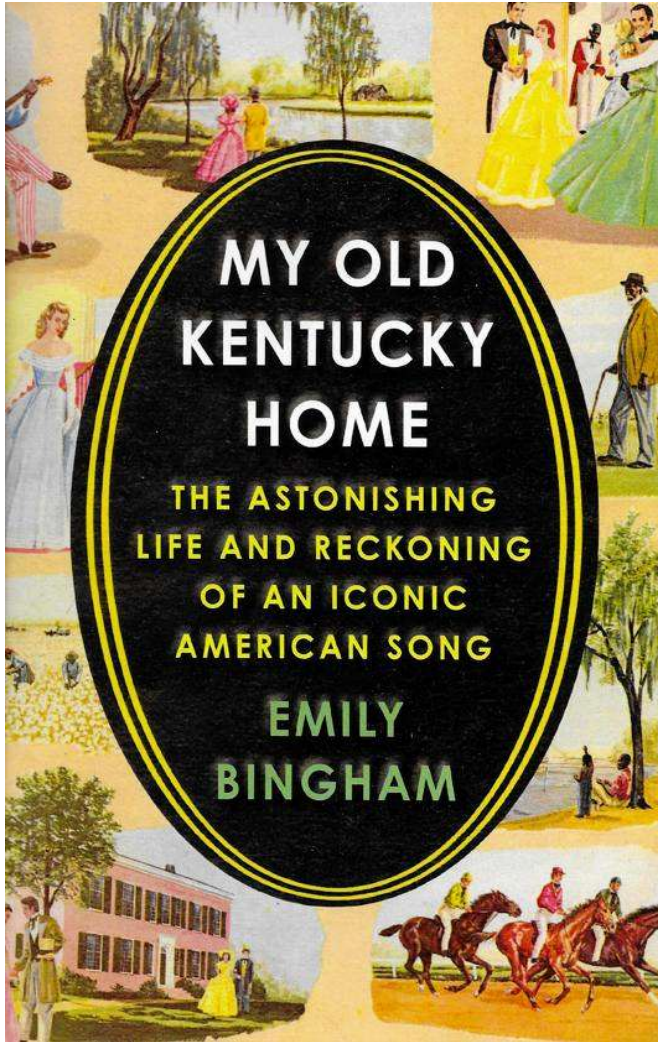


‘A Fascinating Read’

Writer explores anachronistic anthem

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“My Old Kentucky Home: The Astonishing Life and Reckoning of an Iconic American Song” by Emily Bingham. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022, 352 pages, \$30.00 (hardcover).



“There was a time when it was just a song,” Emily Bingham explains at the beginning of “My Old Kentucky Home: The Astonishing Life and Reckoning of an Iconic American Song,” her new deep dive into the origins and evolution of a song that most Kentuckians no doubt know by heart. “I grew up in Kentucky a few miles from Louisville’s Churchill Downs racecourse. Though ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ was our state anthem, it got little notice in my household except when it materialized, grandiose and opaque, each Derby season.”

“With the adults of the house off watching the horse race, I hummed the misunderstanding that ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ was a wartime ballad about defeated Confederates struggling back to families and homesteads, a forerunner of scenes {Margaret} Mitchell {author of ‘Gone with the Wind’} lingered over in later chapters,” Bingham continues a little later. “I now understand the truth that the famous American songwriter Stephen Foster’s ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ was first and always a song about slavery. At the same time, for me and so many, it has conjured ‘tear-compelling’ pangs of homesickness, visions of loved ones, innocent times when life was ‘all merry, all happy and bright.’ Tapping into a universal

emotion and layering it on top of a pretty tune helped make a temporal hit into one for the ages, dear to millions of white people, their children, and their children’s children’s children and beyond.”

So begins a long, winding and utterly mesmerizing journey into the unlikely trajectory of a cultural symbol that few of those who have enthusiastically repeated its enigmatic and increasingly obscure (with the natural passing of time) lyrics fully recognize or appreciate. Certainly, unless you an ardent student of history, you are probably unaware of the fierce debates that have played out over the decades since it was first published in 1853. The book is literally a chronicle of the controversies that have been spawned since its release almost 170 years ago. Case in point: The Boston School Board’s decision to ban “Forty Best Old Songs,” a “state of the art” music education textbook, in 1914.

“Black parents in Boston likewise rose up against Foster’s ‘plantation melodies,’” Bingham notes in “To Tote the Weary Load: The Burden of Black Uplift,” the fifth chapter and one I found to be especially instructive. “The first documented public debate over the songs’ racist symbolism and stereotypes sparked a white counterattack that resounds a century later. Boston schools were integrated in 1914, and the district’s brand-new textbook, ‘Forty Best Old Songs,’ was state of the art for American music education. But it included seven tunes with racial slurs... The members of the board voted unanimously to reject the book.”

“The white Boston school board’s willingness to hear ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ as harmful in 1914 was exceedingly rare if not unique among white officials at any level,” Bingham continues. “(It still is, to this day.) Over the next decades, countless blackface tunes, pitched as ‘folk’ songs and therefore innocent, were absorbed into songbooks aimed at young people, a little noticed whitewashing of minstrelsy through infantilization. Federal policy makers routinely ignored objections from Black citizens.”

Sound familiar?

“My Old Kentucky Home” is extensively researched, with 52 pages of source notes and a 20-page bibliography at the conclusion of the preface, ten chapters and coda that form the main narrative. The literary style is fluid and conversational, accessible to scholars as well as the more casual reader; moreover, the prose is augmented and enhanced by the inclusion of a plethora of old photographs and other illustrations that serve to bring the text to life that would not have been the case otherwise. Full disclosure: I did not know how captivated I would be by this manuscript when I was first asked to review it. But any hesitancy I might have had when my copy first arrived quickly melted away as I dove into this exquisite primer on a song that has taken on mythical status in the Commonwealth.

A Visiting Honors Faculty Fellow at Bellarmine University, Bingham has a PhD in U.S. History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her essays, articles, and reviews have appeared in “*Vogue*,” “*Ohio Valley History*,” “*The Journal of Southern History*,” “*Newsweek*,” “*The Wall Street Journal*,” and “*New England Review*.” She served as editor with Thomas A. Underwood, on “*The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal: Essays After I’ll Take My Stand*.” Her previous books include “*Irrepressible: The Jazz Age Life of Henrietta Bingham*,” and “*Mordecai: An Early American Family*.”

Obviously, one of the reasons Bingham’s treatise resonates with so many after so many years is that she deals with themes that are – for better or worse – still universal.

“In 2020, ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ once again became a matter of public debate,” the author observes in “Coda,” the concluding chapter. “The unifying ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ sing-alongs came to a halt, drowned out by chants of ‘Breonna Taylor - say her name.’ Amid a summer of racial reckoning and protest, Churchill Downs planned for the rescheduled Kentucky Derby in September. That date – when the nation, indeed the world, would be watching Louisville – became a leverage point for those demanding ‘Justice for Breonna.’ Some protesters talked of targeting the Derby itself.”

“Foster’s old, old song found itself in the news,” Bingham goes on. “‘BloodHorse’ magazine, the racing industry mainstay, reported that Churchill Downs Inc.’s higher-ups might scrap the ritual singing. The question of what to do divided people. Some threatened to boycott the Derby permanently if the track abandoned the icon. Others pleaded with Churchill Downs to suspend the onetime blackface tune out of respect for Breonna Taylor, who was ‘gunned down in her ‘Kentucky Home.’”

Honestly, “My Old Kentucky Home” was a fascinating read that I found hard to put down. My sense is that many readers would have the same challenge. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.