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Princess of the Jazz Age

The wild daughter of a Louisville newspaper baron would ferry friends into the sticks to listen to jug bands.



Henrietta Bingham (left) with her brother and sister-in-law in Italy, 1931. PHOTO: FAMILY COLLECTION

By Edward Kosner

Updated Sept. 4, 2015 4:42 pm ET

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Henrietta Bingham was one of those entrancing creatures more often met in books than in life. The randy Jazz Age daughter of the celebrated Bingham dynasty of Louisville, Ky., she was lithe and athletic, an accomplished horsewoman and tennis player. Her violet eyes, deep creamy voice and unflagging appetites bewitched lovers of both sexes, serially and simultaneously. One beau, the grain trader Jacques Haussmann, who molted into the producer and director John Houseman, wrote her passionate, self-lacerating love letters and was driven to read the sexologist Havelock Ellis for tips on how to satisfy her.

An authentic Southern belle, she recognized the beauty and art in black blues and jazz long before her contemporaries. She took up the saxophone and ferried friends deep into the sticks to hear jug bands jamming on the porches of sharecropper shacks. One night at a London party, she entertained the artsy crowd by crooning the chain-gang lament “Water Boy,” later recorded by Paul Robeson and Odette.

IRREPRESSIBLE

By Emily Bingham

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 369 pages, \$28

Beneath the gaiety, Henrietta, as her great-niece Emily Bingham calls her throughout her biography “Irrepressible,” was a tormented soul. The root of her despair was her pathological relationship with her father, Robert Worth Bingham, the founder of the Bingham newspaper empire in Louisville. In their era, the Bingham were newspaper royalty. But the “Judge”—he kept the title after a brief appointment on the bench—was a neurotic mess infatuated by his beautiful and charismatic daughter.

Their bond was sealed, Emily Bingham writes, when the Judge’s first wife, “Babes,” was killed in 1913 in an automobile crash with the 12-year-old Henrietta at her side. From that moment, Bingham was obsessed with his daughter, his need for her companionship never wavering for the remaining 24 years of his life, despite two more marriages.

It was Bingham’s brief second marriage to Mary Lily Flagler, the youngish widow of Florida developer Henry Flagler and reputedly “the richest woman in America,” with a fortune worth over \$2 billion today, that made him. Mary Lily, a secret alcoholic, died within a year of their wedding. Rumors that she’d been poisoned dogged Bingham for decades, but her estate enabled him to buy two Louisville papers, turning him into one of the most influential men in the state.

Henrietta’s sick pas de deux with the Judge lasted until his death, and Emily Bingham is sure that it maladjusted her for life. She escaped to London and spent most of her 20s and 30s deep in the Bloomsbury set, though periodically succumbing to his pathetic pleas and returning to Louisville or joining him on Scottish hunting trips. His leverage wasn’t only emotional. Henrietta’s expat life depended on an allowance, and the Judge tugged the purse strings to keep her in line.

“Her seemingly effortless ability to attract desire and give pleasure lay at the core of her identity,” writes Emily Bingham. “Of the desire she drew and the pleasure she bestowed involved other women. At Smith College, she began a romance with Mina Kirstein, her English instructor, who was just two years older than Henrietta. Kirstein, who was Jewish, came from a rich and cultured family: Her father was a partner of the Filene brothers in their department store, and her two younger brothers, George and Lincoln, were to have long careers in the arts. But Mina, who became as fixated on the girl as Judge Bingham, soon had competition.

Over the next 30 years, Henrietta would conduct liaisons with a succession of attractive and talented women, including the actresses Beatrix “Peggy” Lehmann, Hope Williams and Dorothe Bigelow Holland and the sad-eyed poetess Eleanor Carroll Chilton. There was an on-again, off-again affair in England with the painter Dora Carrington, who sketched the lissome Henrietta wearing only pumps and who wrote after a weekend tryst that for the first time she’d experienced “ecstasy . . . and no feelings of shame afterward.”

“Her affairs began passionately but rarely held her attention,” Ms. Bingham writes. Real commitment, she speculates, risked another loss like the one she had suffered with her mother’s death and conflicted with her unresolvable feelings for her madly possessive father.

Still, Henrietta was capable of a sustained relationship. The deepest was with Helen Hull Jacobs, a blond beauty and champion tennis player. For some reason, Judge Bingham, now the American ambassador to the Court of St. James’s, sanctioned the romance, and the women lived together in London and America as openly as the times would permit and dreamed of settling down together on a Kentucky horse farm.

Given her emotional turmoil and her adventurous spirit—and her wealth—Henrietta was a natural candidate for the revolutionary new treatment of psychoanalysis. Mina Kirstein believed herself not to be homosexual and felt that Henrietta could never achieve her brilliant potential—whatever that was—unless she could be liberated from lesbianism. So in 1922, Mina arranged for Henrietta to be psychoanalyzed by Ernest Jones, the British leader in the field, who was about to undertake the English translation of Sigmund Freud’s standard works.

Jones was treating Mina as well as Henrietta, and he shared each woman’s intimacies with the other, a technique frowned on today. He was the one who broke the news to Henrietta that Mina was engaged to be married—to a man. Jones was determined to enhance his reputation by pioneering the psychological study of lesbianism and finding a “cure.” Three years into Henrietta’s treatment, Jones proclaimed confidently: “I think she will have done with homosexuality and move on to the next stage.”

Henrietta’s involvement with her psychoanalyst mirrored her relationship with her lovers: engagement and flight. She saw Jones off and on for years but never achieved the breakthroughs he kept spotting just over the headrest of the chaise longue. The Jazz Age comfort with—or, at least, tolerance of—homosexuality gave way to a more repressive tone. Henrietta helped her father campaign for Franklin Roosevelt, acted as his hostess during his tenure as ambassador in London, and pitched in on the home front during World War II, but she was slowly unraveling.

Always a drinker, she was overtaken by her alcoholism. Between 1940 and 1960, she suffered a dozen breakdowns and a half-dozen hospitalizations. She became addicted to Seconal, the “dolls” of Jacqueline Susann’s “Valley of the Dolls.” She escaped from one hospital stay to her Manhattan apartment only to be hauled back in a straitjacket. Out of the blue, in June 1954, she married a man named Benjamin Franklin McKenzie, variously described by Henrietta’s circle as a barkeep, headwaiter at a nightclub, and a Fulton Street fishmonger. The marriage lasted the summer. She struggled on for more than a decade, her wicker pill carrier full of Dexedrine, Dexamyl, Seconal, Dormitol and Dormison. In 1968, at 67, she collapsed and died of a massive internal hemorrhage.

Henrietta left little trace. Mina Kirstein, who became a respected biographer, made no mention of her in her published memoir. John Houseman destroyed her letters (although she kept his in an attic trunk). She was left out of the film of Dora Carrington’s life. She was all but erased from the Judge Bingham archive that her brother Barry, later the publisher of the Louisville Courier-Journal, donated to the Library of Congress in the 1970s.

Still, Emily Bingham’s painstaking reconstruction of Henrietta’s story shows that she was a pioneer of sorts—a poignant case of a life unspooled before the world was ready for her odd grace.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of a memoir, “It’s News to Me,” of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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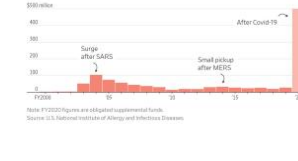
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