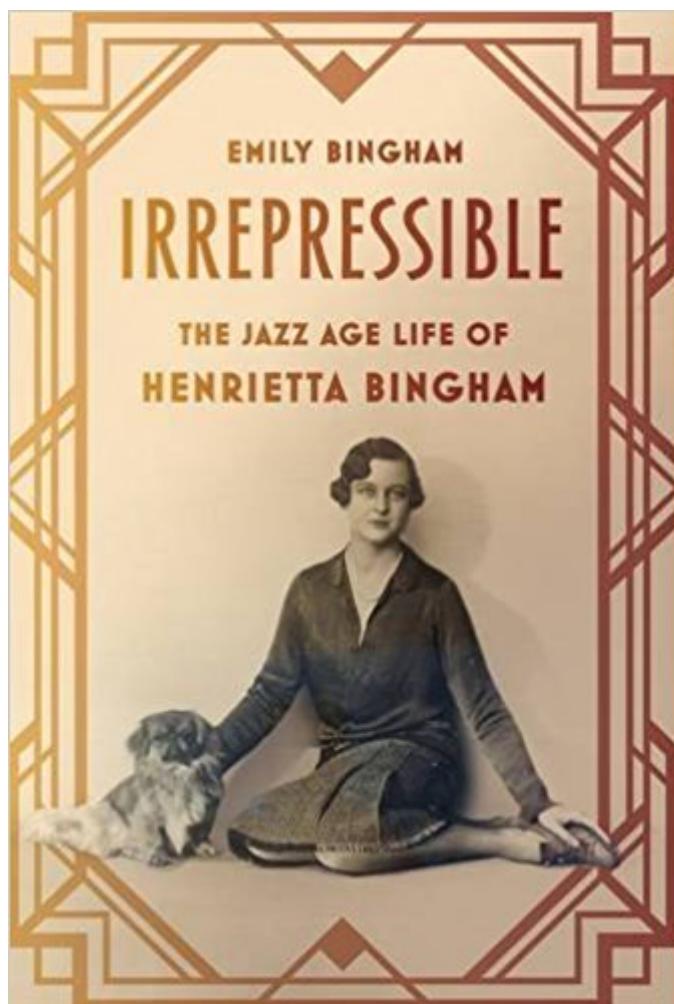


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# Irrepressible: The Jazz Age Life Of Henrietta Bingham



## Synopsis

Raised like a princess in one of the most powerful families in the American South, Henrietta Bingham was offered the helm of a publishing empire. Instead, she ripped through the Jazz Age like an F. Scott Fitzgerald character: intoxicating and intoxicated, selfish and shameless, seductive and brilliant, endearing and often terribly troubled. In New York, Louisville, and London, she drove both men and women wild with desire, and her youth blazed with sex. But her love affairs with women made her the subject of derision and caused a doctor to try to cure her queerness. After the speed and pleasure of her early decades, the toxicity of judgment from others, coupled with her own anxieties, resulted in years of addiction and breakdowns. And perhaps most painfully, she became a source of embarrassment for her family--she was labeled "a three-dollar bill." But forebears can become fairy-tale figures, especially when they defy tradition and are spoken of only in whispers. For the biographer and historian Emily Bingham, the secret of who her great-aunt was, and just why her story was concealed for so long, led to *Irrepressible: The Jazz Age Life of Henrietta Bingham*. Henrietta rode the cultural cusp as a muse to the Bloomsbury Group, the daughter of the ambassador to the United Kingdom during the rise of Nazism, the seductress of royalty and athletic champions, and a pre-Stonewall figure who never buckled to convention. Henrietta's audacious physicality made her unforgettable in her own time, and her ecstatic and harrowing life serves as an astonishing reminder of the stories that lie buried in our own families.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Henrietta Bingham's greatest achievement was making people fall in love with her. Thus

she offers a delicious excuse to be back in a time and among a group in which love was celebrated with gratifying complexity and tenderness . . . You can read *Irrepressible* strictly for plot because [Emily] Bingham . . . propels us along at the exhilarating clip of the sporty *Sunbeam* in which Henrietta drove her Bloomsbury friends around the British countryside. Its literary value, though, is that of an attenuated tragedy, reminding us of our continuing failure to help people, wealthy or poor, who can't quite survive life, even as they try valiantly to live it. Miranda Purves, *The New York Times Book Review* "Henrietta Bingham, the great-aunt of the author of this haunting biography, is best remembered for her association with the Bloomsbury group . . . Bingham captures both the giddy rebellion of her aunt's youth and her slow, startling unravelling." The New Yorker "Henrietta Bingham was one of those entrancing creatures more often met in books than in life . . . 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." Edward Kosner, *The Wall Street Journal* "In this sensitive and emotionally rich biography . . . [Henrietta Bingham] flashes unforgettably back into life." Joanna Scutts, *The Washington Post* "The life of Henrietta Bingham, as recounted by her great-niece Emily in *Irrepressible*, is so engrossing that readers will finish the book astonished at not having heard of her before . . . Emily Bingham has given us a faithful unretouched portrait of a bewitching, courageous, sometimes maddening woman . . . My advice is don't wait for the movie--get a copy of this engaging book and read it now." Jennie Rathbun, *Lambda Literary* "Irrepressible is the absorbing, deeply moving, and brilliantly researched story of an intoxicating woman whose personal life was as turbulent as the times she lived in: Henrietta Bingham dazzles the reader as she dazzled the artists, writers, and musicians around her in the Jazz Age and beyond." Frances Osborne, author of *The Bolter* "A colorful portrait of a daring woman. F. Scott Fitzgerald never invented a Jazz-Age seductress as bold, brash, and devastating as Henrietta Bingham (1901-1968), the author's great-aunt . . . Throughout, the author ably illuminates the character of her great-aunt, who 'took freedom as far as she could.' Deeply researched, Bingham's engrossing biography brings her glamorous, tormented ancestor vividly to life." Kirkus Reviews "Deeply researched and written with passion, this is the story of a tantalizing and unconventional woman in her elusive search for happiness. *Irrepressible* lives up to its dramatic title." Michael Holroyd, author of *A Book of Secrets* "With *Irrepressible*, Emily Bingham has forensically crafted a riveting story of the American South, as her great aunt's taboo-shattering sexual odyssey spirals out of control. The mesmerizing *It Girl* crashes

headlong into Jazz Age Bloomsbury; the result is a literary masterpiece of ground-breaking social history.â• â• â• Geordie Greig, author of Breakfast with Lucianâ• â• â• “Emily Bingham’s lively and intimate life of Henrietta Bingham sheds surprising light on one Jazz Age woman’s transatlantic adventures. Irrepressible gives us a hard-drinking, Harlem-loving temptress who captivated women and men alike, in both England and the United States, leaving the ground littered with their broken hearts. But it’s also the story of a woman torn between her love for her controlling father and the desire to live life on her own terms.â• â• â• Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, author of Mr. and Mrs. Princeâ• â• â• “In crisp, graceful prose, Bingham trails her great-aunt from an athletic youth shadowed by her mother’s death and father’s marriages through her years as a magical presence and muse to her middle-age descent into breakdowns and addiction . . . With meticulous research and compassion, her great-niece has put some of those pieces together and Henrietta back in the Bingham family album.â• â• â• Jane Sumner, The Dallas Morning News

Emily Bingham is the great-niece of Henrietta Bingham. She is the author of *Mordecai: An Early American Family* and co-editor of *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal: Essays After I'll Take My Stand*. She earned a Ph.D. from University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and frequently teaches at Centre College. She lives with her family in Louisville, Kentucky.

Interesting look at the life of a woman of means who consorted with many of the bold name figures of the 20's and 30's. Bingham obviously was a very troubled woman. She was a lesbian at a time when it was nearly impossible to live openly in most circles. However, Henrietta Bingham did have the advantage of wealth and the ability to move in circles in which being homosexual was not forbidden or hidden. It was an atmosphere in which she could have made a life for her self with the woman/women she loved but something prevented her from committing to any one -- male or female lovers. Although her homosexuality was certainly the cause of some of her emotional issues, frankly, I thought that the thing in her life that caused the greatest turmoil for her was the fact of having her mother killed in her presence in a horrific train/car accident and subsequently seeing her father marry Mary Lily Flagler and then having her die under questionable circumstances which dogged the father for the rest of his life. It also was obvious that Robert Worth Bingham, her father, had a suffocating attachment to her and she to him -- and she spent her life trying to "escape" that attachment but never successfully made the break that she so desperately needed to make. Ultimately it's a sad story and a sad life. I kept waiting for Henrietta to drop the

faÃfÆ'Ã Â§ade and live with the woman she loved but -- she didn't and instead allowed herself to drift into drinking and drugs and basically wasted her life having accomplished nothing of importance. Her father was suffocating but he also provided her with the money to live well and he was also willing to give her the opportunity to takeover and run the newspaper that he owned. That kind of thinking on his part for his only daughter was far outside the mold of men in the 1930's. Yet, she rejected the opportunity to manage the papers which just may have given her a purpose in life beyond being "fascinating" to both men and women.

In the last paragraph of *Irrepressible. The Jazz Age Life of Henrietta Bingham*, the author writes: Henrietta leaves us with a series of sounds: unceasing calls to "come home"; ice clinking in emptying highball glasses; a saxophone note trailing away as the party ends; a tennis racket smashing a ball; a powerful car engine sighing as it's shut off; pills rattling in a bottle. She took freedom as far as she could. She gave pleasure. By not living the brilliant life expected of her, she disappointed her father, her brother, her lovers. Henrietta's charm and best efforts could not dissolve the pain she spent years trying to escape, but in her return to us again she may, even briefly, find acceptance. *Irrepressible. The Jazz Age Life of Henrietta Bingham* is a wonderful tribute to "that mysterious relative, that someone we've never met but somehow have always known. Bravo Emily Bingham! *Irrepressible* is a most interesting read.

This book could have been called "Irresistible." That well describes the protagonist, Henrietta Bingham, the Kentucky heiress whose elusive sensuality and mesmerizing eyes obsessed Dora Carrington, John Houseman, Mina Kirstein and many - many - others in the 1920s and 1930s. It also describes the book itself, written with elegance and authority by Henrietta's grand niece, Emily Bingham, a respected historian who was drawn to the mystery of Henrietta, a figure of fascination and shame within the Bingham's privileged Louisville world. The book is based on deep research and the lucky discovery of hitherto undiscovered letters that open the door on a world of sexual passion and yearning that is urgent and human in a way that feels almost foreign today. At the heart of Henrietta's story is the relationship with her dominating father, Judge Robert Worth Bingham, the controversial owner of The Courier Journal in Louisville and ambassador to the Court of St. James's. Emily Bingham has done no less than rescued Henrietta by telling her moving, fascinating, and long-buried story.

Having grown up in the Louisville area with the Bingham family "aura", and having read an earlier book, "The Binghams of Louisville" by David Chandler, I was especially interested in reading about Henrietta Bingham, whose real life was obviously "suitably contained" by this very powerful family. "Irrepressible" describes how a gay woman with wealth, in the Jazz Age, could seek out a fairly comfortable lifestyle in Europe where her sexuality was not as forbidden among the literary, musical and social scene in which she had privy to, thanks to her illustrious but overbearing father's political stature in England. Her beauty and personality overshadowed negative situations, and only when WW II made it necessary for her to return to the United States did her lesbian lifestyle begin to unravel this fascinating woman. Hampered by social norms of that era, and born decades too early, she was unable to find any lasting happiness, sinking into alcoholism and mental stress, fading into social oblivion and death. Written with a great deal of compassion by a niece, it is peppered with great deal of name-dropping from the rich and famous of the Jazz Age scene.

This was a well written and researched biography. It was especially interesting that the author was Henrietta's descendant. There were many secrets in Henrietta's life. She was bisexual which was not well accepted in America at that time. She was extremely charming, loved in a somewhat suffocating way by her father, traveled frequently between Britain and the United States, was a darling of the Bloomsbury group, and simply followed her heart wherever it led her. In spite of her charisma and great charm, she ultimately ended up having not accomplished anything of real substance and turning to alcohol to assuage her loneliness. The book covers the years leading up to WW1. Much of historic interest.

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