When he was growing up in Dallas, Texas, in the 1960s and ’70s, Chris Tomlinson was rather proud of his family’s slaveholding and Confederate past. As an adult, he learned more about Tomlinson Hill, a 54,000-acre cotton plantation in Falls County, and its two sets of Tomlinson families (one of which produced National Football League star LaDainian Tomlinson), and felt a responsibility to discover what had happened on the land, to “confront the possible crimes of my ancestors, and to examine if I had benefited from them.”

In this book, Tomlinson, a former war correspondent and now a reporter for the Houston Chronicle, sets the story of his own “inheritance” in the context of the realities of race and identity in the United States. His conclusions about “the sins of our fathers” and his claim that “the embers of our racist past are far from cold” are neither new nor surprising, but retain power because they are so personal.

Although he cannot prove that his great-grandfather was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, Tomlinson reveals that Robert Edward Lee Tomlinson defended lynching. “Even if he did nothing,” Tomlinson insists, R.E.L. “allowed others to maintain the power and privilege he enjoyed in the community by employing terrorism.”

And Tomlinson insists “the old excuse we southerners use for our ancestors — that they didn’t know any better — doesn’t hold water.” In 1921, he points out, after hundreds of men marched downtown behind an American flag and a burning cross, the Dallas Morning News editorialized that “if freedom is endangered, it is by the redivivus of the mob spirit in the disguising garb of the Ku Klux Klan.”

Ignorance can, indeed, be willful, though it should be pointed out that Tomlinson himself acknowledges that because he sang “Dixie” in school, where he was taught that northern “carpetbaggers” were evil; his parents forbade him from using racist language but did not explain the injustices all around him; and the only black people he had met were servants, he “never considered that nonwhites might look at my
family history with anything less than awe.”

In 2014, no black or white Tomlinsons live on the Hill. Now that his curiosity about his family history has been quenched, Chris Tomlinson has no desire to take up residence there. LaDanian Tomlinson has some interest in buying a ranch in Falls County, but his wife does not share his enthusiasm.

The best legacy of Tomlinson Hill and his “unflinching account of the past and its impact on the present,” Chris Tomlinson concludes, would be “painful but essential conversations” about race relations, genetics and identity, and the impact of culture, tradition, and myth.

The embers of racism will not be “easily extinguished.” But, it is worth noting that thanks in no small measure to anti-discrimination laws, a more wholesome public discourse, and face-to-face interactions between many whites and blacks in classrooms and workplaces, America’s millennial generation is “by any measure, the least racially bigoted of any generation ever tested.”