Deane L. Root

The "Mythtory" of Stephen C. Foster or Why His True Story Remains Untold

Editor's note. Deane L. Root, Curator of the Stephen Foster Memorial and Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, was invited to participate in the opening ceremonies for the AMRC, March 12-13, 1990. He was asked to lead a colloquium on a topic of his own choosing. The lecture portion of that colloquium is given in transcription below.

I'm especially pleased to talk to a mixed audience from the general public as well as those with specific experience in music history research and other kinds of music scholarship. I hope to show what sorts of new directions or new insights are possible in working with a Research Center such as the Foster Hall Collection at the University of Pittsburgh, and such as you are establishing here at the American Music Research Center.

In the entry on Stephen Foster in the New Grove Dictionary of American Music, Wiley Hitchcock says, "[Stephen Foster] was essentially self-taught as a musician" (Hitchcock 1986, II, 156-58). He also says that Foster "managed his finances badly" and his was "a northerner's notion of" plantation life. These factors Hitchcock feels are important for an understanding of Foster's music. In the same dictionary, an entire section of the article on popular music written by Charles Hamm is devoted to Foster as well. In it Hamm says: "[Foster's] texts, which he wrote himself, are rarely topical, and usually nostalgic. They reflect the longing for a return to a simpler era that was the dominant mood of the period before the Civil War (Hamm 1986, III, 593)." These are representative of the most recent scholarship on Stephen Foster. Is their assessment correct? Or might it be possible that all of us misunderstand this one person, and perhaps an important aspect of the entire antebellum period? Even in the face of unanimous opinion, it behooves historians to pose several questions. Are the original source materials for their topic complete? How directly do they stem from the composer himself? Have some relevant materials been overlooked or undervalued? Have the materials been altered in any way to affect their content, and, if so, how and why were they altered? Is our perception of the subject skewed by intervening authors who tried to change the way we view it? And ultimately do we truly understand the original intentions of the composer; can we see through the varying interpretations that, layer upon layer, have been applied to him and to his work over succeeding generations?

The answer, as I'll try to demonstrate in my talk today, is that we know very little about Stephen Foster, even though he was the most famous songwriter of the nineteenth century, and he is still the best-known American composer in

many countries of the world today. He wrote songs which, I'm sure, everybody in this room has known since childhood. He appears on charts of great composers in schoolrooms around the world. He is the only individual consistently given entire chapters in histories of American music.

In spite of this status, historians have not yet told us about his musical intentions, which seems to me a fundamental question. The title of my talk is more than a play on the contrasted notions of myth and history. A set of myths has accrued to Stephen Foster, popular beliefs and traditions, that embody ideals or prevalent attitudes within wider American culture, but which may be false or misleading. What are these myths, what are their origins, how have they been nurtured? There is a bit of detective work involved in searching for clues in our efforts to uncover the truths; therefore, there is a bit of mystery as well.

The core myths as reflected in passages I read to you from *Amerigrove* are that Foster was an untutored genius and succeeded through sheer will and inspiration. When one left him so did the other. He longed for the old order, the Old South. And because he had an artist's mind, he was incapable of handling finances.

There are other, personal myths that I am not going into today, such as that he was a drunkard (He didn't die of alcoholism but rather from weakness as the result of a fever and a fall in his room) and that he was a Southerner (actually, he was a Pittsburgher, a Northerner). We can debunk these myths very easily.

But these other myths about his music are harder to deal with. What are the sources that we can go to to try to learn the truth? We are in the extraordinary position of having nearly all the extant original sources for this subject collected in one resource library, and that is the Foster Hall Collection at the Stephen Foster Memorial at the University of Pittsburgh.

For biographical data and any insight into his personality that we can draw from biographical materials, we have, first of all, his own letters. There are only about twenty preserved for us, and this is far fewer than for other famous persons of his era. Far fewer than for other members of his family, in fact. His family's letters in the Foster Collection run into the hundreds, from the 1820s into the twentieth century, but especially from the 1840s and 50s, which was the central period of his career. From the family, we also have account books, scrap books, deeds and other legal documents to draw upon.

There are other documents in Foster's own hand—his account book which he kept for a few years, records of how much he paid for the laundry, how much for the rent, and how much he got from his publishers—piece by piece, title by title. We also have notes that he scrawled in books or gave to friends, and contracts with his publisher. And we have some other artifacts: musical instruments such as a flute, a melodeon, and three pianos that he played, personal effects like his coin purse and a little piece of scrap paper in it when he died on which was written "Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts," silver spoons that were given to him and his wife at their wedding, and then more important things like original photographs and other portraits of Stephen Foster. Only five poses are

found in the original photographs; and nearly all the portraits seem to be based on those photographs. We are doing research at the moment to try to authenticate those portraits that seem to stem from his lifetime and are attributed to major American portrait artists.

For the music itself, what are our sources? There are only sixteen music manuscripts in his hand. Nearly all of them are publishers' fair copies (copies that he sent off to the publisher) that even have the ends of the lines marked. We have thousands and thousands of first and early editions of his music, assembled in the Foster Hall Collection in an attempt to locate every copy that is in some way bibliographically distinct, even if it means that the price on the cover had changed or that an ad on the back had changed, or especially if a note had been altered in the music text. We even have arrangements of his music not by him, from his own lifetime up to the present.

Among the most revealing items in the Foster Hall Collection is the composer's blank book. This is a manuscript copy book, about 8-1/2 by 11 inches, 124 leaves, that contains drafts of song lyrics, unpublished verses, a few musical sketches, doodlings, and miscellaneous notes. Forty-four out of the forty-eight song lyrics that he published between 1851 and 1860, the most productive period of his life, are found here.

It is also helpful to keep in mind what does not exist, what is known to be lost. Most of the music manuscripts, of course, are lost. We know that he sent music manuscripts to publishers, but the publishers never returned them to the family or deposited them in a library. A few of the ones that survived were given to expositions during the Civil War as curiosities and found their way into private collectors' hands. A few came back to the family, and a few went to the Library of Congress. One turned up three years ago, by the way, a piano piece called "Autumn Waltz," a previously unknown piece bound into a binder's volume, a collection that belonged to a young lady from a town near Pittsburgh. I was able to authenticate it by matching it with the paper and ink in other manuscripts we have. It dates from approximately 1847, before Foster was a professional songwriter. We hope that others will eventually be found.

Nearly all the drafts of his lyrics except those in his copy book are gone, as are all but one musical sketch. We have almost nothing from the last four years of his life when he was in New York City, surviving by selling new songs outright to the publishers rather than collecting royalties, and most of his own letters are gone (as I have already indicated) except those of his youth. Nothing that he or his wife wrote to each other survives. There is no glimpse of their domestic life that can tell us something about his ambitions or events that could have affected his music (Much of his music was autobiographical).

Almost no letters survive in which he commented on his career, his work, or individual songs, and yet he was a prolific letter writer. This we know from comments in other family members' letters. Why? After Stephen Foster's death in 1864, his older brother, Morrison Foster, served, in effect, as Stephen's literary executor and filled any requests for copies of photographs, the composer's

autographs, manuscript pieces of music, and biographical as well as other information.

He recognized the demand for an authoritative account of the composers's life and in the 1890s attempted to fix a permanent version through a biography and collected edition (Foster, Morrison, 1896). The advertisement in the circular that he used to launch the biography tells us a good deal about what was going on in his mind as he created that work (Figure 1). Morrison's is the only biography by someone who knew Stephen Foster. It is very unusual to have a figure so well known in American culture, but with so little biographical substance. What's more, Morrison's biography serves only as a preface to the edition of Foster's complete works. The edition contains about two-thirds of Foster's authentic compositions, which number about 200. Morrison's collected edition, by the way, is not even much help to us, as it seems to be based largely on first editions of Foster's sheet music that were bound together by Foster's publishers and given to Foster as a present.

Foster himself left no autobiographical statement, and most other biographies have been prepared from secondary sources. Early articles and reminiscences of Foster are very highly colored by their authors' sensationalist or self-aggrandizing accounts. The alcoholism myth, for example, stems from one such account by a woman (another composer) who was professionally jealous of Foster's success and wrote of seeing him in bars in New York City.

Morrison's daughter, Evelyn Foster Morneweck, inherited the family's papers from her father and several decades later prepared a very thorough account of the Foster family history and a genealogy that is still the most reliable one available (Morneweck, 1944).

John Tasker Howard, a very prominent music historian in the 1920s and 30s, worked with the same materials once they had come to the Foster Hall Collection to write *Stephen Foster: America's Troubadour*, the only authoritative biography, written fifty-six years ago [!] (Howard, 1934).

According to the founding curator of the Foster Hall Collection, "The biographical section of Morrison's book must be considered a series of biographical anecdotes, rather than a biography. Its importance lies as much in its presentation of the personality of the composer as in its factual statements" (Hodges 1948, 4-5). Listen to how Morrison presents his brother: "A man of genius who, however modest in his demeanor, was accustomed to look deep into the thoughts and motives of men." "He had but few [music] teachers.... Stephen ... needed only elementary instruction, for his rapid brain and quick perception scorned slow progress by the beaten path, and he leaped forward to a comprehension of the whole scope of the instrument by the force of his great musical genius." And then he ties Stephen to the great European masters: "But he was not content to rely on inspiration alone for his guidance in music. He studied deeply, and burned much midnight oil over the works of the masters, especially Mozart, Beethoven and Weber." (He didn't mention Schubert.) "They were his delight, and he struggled for years and sounded the profoundest depths of

STEPHEN C. FOSTER.

LIFE AND WORKS

OF

STEPHEN C. FOSTER.

A work that must possess deep interest, not only for Pittsburghers, but for Americans in general, is the "Biography, Songs and Musical Compositions of Stephen C. Foster." This book has been written by the only surviving brother of the composer, the Hon. Morrison Foster, of "Oliver Place," Edgeworth, on the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railway, and the publishing house is the Percy F. Smith Printing and Lithographing Company, of Pittsburgh, Pa. The book is a handsome and complete volume, well illustrated. It is the only full and complete life of a man whose genius bestowed immortality upon his compositions; whose songs will be sung long after men high in other professions and notable in achievement have been forgotten. In giving to the world a life of his famous brother, Mr. Foster has yielded to a pressure long withstood, brought to bear by his friends, as well as to the conviction that no other living person was so well equipped with recollections and with material to produce a full and authentic life of Stephen C. Foster, and a narrative of the songs that have made his name familiar to the world.

Stephen Collins Foster was born July fourth, 1826, in what was then known as Lawrenceville, and which is now that portion of Pittsburgh surrounding and adjacent to the United States Arsenal. His father, William Barclay Foster, was an enterprising and prominent merchant of Pittsburgh, of Scotch-Irish descent, and whose wife was Eliza Clayland Tomlinson, a native of Wilmington, Delaware.

Foster's songs, whether ballads or negro melodies, touch a chord in human hearts that, until the Pittsburgher appeared, had lain dormant. He wedded to homely words, in the dialect of the Southern negro, music full of simple pathos, peculiar to itself, and winning a place not granted to the work of other composers.

The "Biography, etc," will contain all the compositions by Foster, from the "Tioga Waltz," produced in 1840, to "Beautiful Dreamer," written shortly before his death, including "Where is Thy Spirit, Mary?" The music of these compositions and the words of the songs are given, and the total number is over one hundred and sixty. The demand for the book is very large. Mr. Andrew Carnegie has ordered one hundred copies, and the subscriptions of prominent Pittsburghers for over five hundred copies range from five to fifty copies each.

Stephen C. Foster's songs are all popular and all good. Some of the best known are the following, viz: "Old Folks at Home," sometimes called "Swanee Ribber;" "Old Kentucky Home," "Massa's in de Cold Ground," "Hard Times Come Again No More," "Uncle Ned," "Oh Susanna," "Old Black Joe," "Gentle Annie," "Old Dog Tray," "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming," "Nelly Was a Lady," "Nelly Bly," "Laura Lee," "Ellen Bayne," etc.

The work is in one volume of three hundred pages, 9x12. It is sold at $3.00 per copy, handsomely bound in cloth and ornamented in gilt. There are 279 pages of music, and the remainder of the book is made up of biography, illustrations, index, etc.

MORRISON FOSTER, PROPRIETOR,
Shields P. O., Pa.

PERCY F. SMITH PRINTING AND LITHOGRAPHING CO., PUBLISHERS,
204 and 206 Wood Street, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Figure 1. Advertisement for Morrison Foster's biography of Stephen Foster.

musical science. The simplest melodies which he gave to the public were not the accidental rays from an uncultured brain, but were the most thorough and laborious analyses of harmonies, and when he completed them and launched them on the world, he knew they would strike favorably the ear of the most critical as well as the unlearned in music."

So we are assured by his brother that Stephen was a musical genius, untutored and self-guided. But then there is a surprise. Morrison says "that Stephen also became a most creditable artist in water colors as an amusement." This talent is curious because all the doodles we see in his hand are rather crude, and the visual arts are not mentioned anywhere by a family member or friend, nor does any of them survive.

He continues about Stephen's personality: "It was difficult for him to go into society at all. He had a great aversion to shams and glitter. " "He was always indifferent about money or fame. It was perhaps fortunate for him that he had several older brothers, who, being practical business men, advised him on matters which he would not have realized the importance of." In fact, many of the family letters, and almost every letter from his brother, Dunning Foster, is about money. Dunning was a merchant, with a shipping company in Cincinnati, and Stephen worked for him before returning to Pittsburgh to launch his music career. Morrison says that Stephen "found . . . he had no taste for business life." He thus separates Stephen from the pragmatic world, painting him as an artist with no foot in reality or the pragmatic aspects of the world.

Then Morrison practically confers sainthood. "He would sit at home in the evening at the piano and improvise by the hour beautiful strains and harmonies which he did not preserve, but let them float away like fragrant flowers cast upon the flowing water." "At times tears could be seen on his cheeks as he sang, so sensitive was his nature to the influence of true poetry combined with music."

And then to complete the picture Morrison says, "His love for his mother amounted to adoration. . . . There is not one reference to mother in . . . his ballads but came directly from his heart and symbolized his own feelings." I am sure Morrison believed that what he was writing was the truth, but Morrison has painted for all eternity a portrait steeped in the deeply-held faith of mother-worship, of family loyalty, of sentiment, above all, that prevailed in late Victorian American genteel society. He was writing after all in the 1890s, at the end of his own life, and thirty years after Stephen's death.

He could be vicious on this point of family loyalty. When a niece of his filed a lawsuit against other family members, Morrison wrote to her this way: "In that deposition you spit upon the grave of my sister (your sainted mother), you drag from the grave the body of your beautiful sister Lidie, and expose it dishonored and naked to the vulgar comments of a . . . courthouse rabble. . . . You cast dishonor upon me, upon yourself and upon our whole family. My heart almost ceased to beat and tears almost blinded my eyes as I read this deposition."

This is a letter written in 1883, just about ten years before he wrote the biography of his brother. Other family letters talk about having to keep up

appearances of the family. Given his highly charged mind-set about the saintliness of mother and the sanctity of the family, the accuracy of Morrison's portrait of Stephen is difficult to judge.

Moreover, he made certain that there were no other sources that survived from the family that could cast doubts on his account. He altered or destroyed any documents that might have given us a countering version. When Morrison became the head of the family in Pittsburgh after his parents' deaths in 1855, he burned most of the family letters. Those that survived, the ones that he kept, support his protective view of his parents and his siblings. This is doubtless the reason we have none of those letters between family members or from Stephen himself that discuss his financial difficulties, career ambitions or marital strife.

There was no love lost between Morrison and Jane or her family, probably for political reasons, as we will see later. Morrison mentions Jane in his book only in passing. Jane and Stephen lived apart briefly in the early 1850s, about three years from the time they were married, and then for about the last three or four years of Foster's life when he was in New York City. Morrison doesn't give us any information on this, which would have seemed rather important in a biography of Stephen Foster. But Morrison is more than silent on this point.

Two letters do survive from the family that mention this estrangement, but he didn't even want these to reach us. A letter to Morrison from one of the sisters, written during the first separation of Stephen and Jane (Figure 2), says in the fifth line down, "How sorry I feel for dear Stevie. Though when I read your letter I was not at all surprised of the news it contained" (so obviously Morrison had been writing about Stephen) "in regard to him and...." (Morrison wouldn't even let Jane's name remain in the letter.) "I last winter felt convinced" (and then the next two lines are blotted out) "though I never wrote a word of the kind to Stevie for I thought he had trouble enough already." The letter goes on to invite Morrison to visit her.

In one other letter that I found, Morrison used this technique of scrawling through a line with a very heavy-tipped pen to erase any information that he didn't want to appear there. What this letter actually says, as we have been able to decipher it, is about Jane, of course. "I last winter felt convinced that she would either have to change her course of conduct or a separation was inevitable." The mention of a separation was something that Morrison couldn't let exist in this letter.

There is one other letter with a brief reference to this marital difficulty. Morrison, who was the keeper of these materials, took a razor blade and actually cut a line out of the letter.

Morrison also went to great pains to downplay Stephen's collaboration and friendship with a poet, Charles Shiras. He was a life-long friend of Stephen's, the first one in fact that Stephen describes in his own poem in which he briefly characterizes five of his closest friends. Mutual friends claim that Stephen and Charles wrote several songs together. They wrote a play with music called "The Invisible Prince," which received a public performance and was

do I devoutly pray that Gods best blessings may
rest upon you. Dear Dunning too how kind he has
been, I wish we could see him. If he comes up
to Pittsburg I hope he will come out here.
How sorry I feel for dear Stephy, though when
I read your letter, I was not at all surprised
at the news it contained in regard to him and
[illegible] I last winter felt convinced that
[illegible] of
[illegible]. Though
I never wrote a word of the kind to Stephy, for
I thought he had trouble enough already. Tell him
to come out and stay a while with me, we have
a delightful house, well shaded by trees, and

Figure 2. Letter to Morrison Foster from his sister.

reviewed by the Pittsburgh newspaper. Morrison never mentions the play. He doesn't include it in the edition. He claims that Shiras only wrote the lyrics to one of Stephen's songs, the one in which Shiras' name appears on the published cover. The play was not among the items that he has passed down to us. No trace of the score or script has ever been found by historians.

Why this curious invisibility for Shiras? The motives for obscuring Stephen Foster's personal relationships, I think, lie in both this cult of family loyalty for which Morrison was the high priest, and the family's politics. Let me explain the politics. The father, William Barclay Foster, had been a very prominent member of the Democratic Party in Pennsylvania. He served in the state legislature, and most of his livelihood was derived from political appointments. So too had other members of the family enjoyed political careers through appointments, even in Washington, D.C. One of Stephen's sisters was married to the Reverend Edward Buchanan who was the brother of James Buchanan, the last Democrat to sit in the White House before the Civil War. The family naturally took great pride in their connection to the White House and even their visits there during Buchanan's presidency.

But to be a staunch Democrat in the 1850s, I probably don't need to remind you, meant not only supporting state's rights and anti-federalism but also at least tacit support for the institution of slavery and of the old order. In contrast, Jane's father (Stephen's father-in-law), a prominent physician in Pittsburgh, sponsored the first black medical student from this region to attend Harvard Medical School. He wrote him the letter to gain admission, and helped pay his tuition.

And Charles Shiras wrote progressive poetry highly critical of the Democratic Party platform. He published—and this was the ultimate slam for Morrison—an abolitionist newspaper in Pittsburgh called *The Albatross*. And when Frederick Douglass visited Pittsburgh, Charles Shiras accompanied him.

Where does all this leave Stephen Foster? We can believe that he never wished to offend his family, and before the Civil War he certainly never wrote or set any lyrics that openly opposed Democrats' political views. (At least none have survived. If he wrote them and Morrison destroyed them, we don't know about it.) He did participate in a local club to support Buchanan during the presidential campaign. He wrote songs, led rehearsals of the glee club for Buchanan, and a couple of these efforts have survived, but only in manuscript. These were never intended for publication; Foster wrote them only out of respect for his family. Morrison even added his own verses to these songs, by the way. Not until after his parents' deaths, and at the height of the Civil War, did Stephen write any political songs for publication. And then they were in support of Lincoln and restoration of the Union.

If Foster sought not to offend his family, he likewise could not violate the trust of his friends and his in-laws. He openly could neither embrace or deny the politics of abolition. For his songs in the Anglo-Irish parlor tradition—"Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair," "Beautiful Dreamer"—this was no problem. But for the minstrel songs from which he had earned his living, he had to find a way

to avoid their derogatory nature. And he had an additional incentive. He aspired to acceptance by polite society. He was himself, after all, a member of the genteel society of Pittsburgh.

For the textual themes for his minstrel songs, whether of the comic or tragic style, my reading of the surviving evidence in the Foster Hall Collection is that he drew on four principal sources. In reverse order of importance, these are: first, the stories of travel and conditions that appeared in the popular press. (The family subscribed to lots of magazines, Godey's, The National Magazine, and that sort of thing, that contained diaries of travelers in the South, magazines, books, and plays.) Second is his own observations of Southerners, black or white, while he was living in Cincinnati or Pittsburgh. I might add that his only trip to the South was in 1852 after he had written most of his "songs of the South." He and his wife took a riverboat trip to New Orleans. Third, are the first-person accounts: stories of either his own family or friends who visited the South. His mother and sister visited the plantation at what is now "My Old Kentucky Home" State Park, and they told him about their travels. And fourth, probably most important, is what he learned from the black community of Pittsburgh. In the 1830s and 40s, when Foster was a boy at home, Pittsburgh was a major stop on the underground railroad. It had a sizable black community (one of the largest in the North). The Fosters had more than one bound servant from the black community—one in particular was said to have taken Stephen to black religious services and told him stories and sang him songs from the black traditions. So what Stephen knew of the South, what he knew of blacks under slavery, he learned directly from the freedmen, the escaped slaves, and the families of slaves who were living in Pittsburgh.

Some of the songs which were written before he became a professional songwriter in about 1848 are to our ears today demeaning to African Americans. None of them is outrageously caricaturing like "Jump Jim Crow," "Zip Coon," or the other eccentric parodies that were favored by the minstrel troops of that time. But in 1848, the same year as "Oh! Susanna," appeared a song called "Uncle Ned." It is the first song in his output that has the minstrel stage present the grim side of slavery to the public. "Uncle Ned" depicts an elderly slave who is literally worked to death, with no medical care; he has no teeth, no possessions, and the only way he is going to find rest and peace is not on this earth but in heaven. This was revolutionary for the minstrel stage.

A year later he wrote another song called "Nelly was a Lady." (Figure 3.) This is tragedy. The protagonist of the song is on the Mississippi River loading cottonwood, which was fuel for the steamships. He is singing, "Now I'm unhappy and I'm weeping, Can't tote the cottonwood no more; Last night, while Nelly was a-sleeping, Death came a-knocking at the door." And then he remembers that when he saw his Nelly, her warm and radiant smile "seemed like the light of day a-dawning." But now, "Close by the margin of the water, Where the lone weeping willow grows, There lived Virginia s lovely daughter; There she in death may find repose." She is in Virginia, he is on the Mississippi River.

Figure 3. Frontispiece to "Nellie was a Lady."

It is obvious that he had been sold away from his wife. Separation has killed her and it is about to kill him. That's not the image we normally associate with the minstrel stage.

I don't know of an earlier song, by the way, in which a black woman is called a lady—a term that was usually reserved for well-born whites at the time. His songs increasingly challenged the minstrel stereotypes, but did he know what he was about? Did he have some sort of mission in mind?

The only surviving documents in his own hand that actually state something of his intention are two letters to the minstrel leader E. P Christy (which apparently were out of Morrison's hands). Foster was supplying Christy with new songs before their publication; he sent one with a letter saying, in effect, "I am going to have this published next month and you can bring it out beforehand, which will create a sensation and spur the sheetmusic sales." That shows rather savvy business sense as well, but he made a big mistake in 1851 when he sent Christy "Old Folks At Home" and let Christy put his own name on it, thinking this would spur sheetmusic sales even more. He underestimated the power of his own name.

He wrote to Christy about another song in 1851 and said, "Remember it should be sung in a pathetic, not a comic style." Even after several years of their association, he had to caution Christy not to do cutups with his song but to perform it as tragedy. When he wrote to Christy trying to get his own name back on "Old Folks At Home," he said, "As I once intimated to you, I had the intention of omitting my name on my Ethiopian songs, owing to the prejudice against them by some, which might injure my reputation as a writer of another style of music [household songs of the "Jeanie" type], but I find that by my efforts I have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order." This is the only evidence that survives from his own hand about what he was doing.

We also have the evidence of the songs themselves. By the time he wrote the letter above he was no longer using the term "Ethiopian Melodies" on the music itself, as appears on "Nelly Was A Lady." He was using the term, "Plantation Melodies" instead (Figure 4). Why this change? It is subtle, but it conveys the notion that we are no longer dealing with some exotic setting in another continent but these were real people in real places in this continent.

The covers are also important for what they don't contain. If you have ever looked through any minstrel sheetmusic from this period, you will expect to see cartoons of prancing and grotesque figures of blacks. This doesn't occur on Foster's music. Indeed, on most of the covers there are no pictures at all. When he did have a picture on the cover of a minstrel music edition that he authorized his publisher to put out, it was the portraits of the gentlemen themselves in formal dress, not in black face. By 1854, as illustrated on the cover of "Ellen Bayne" (Figure 5), one year after "My Old Kentucky Home," his minstrel music had evolved away from depicting even the South; rather, it was "Old Dog Tray,"

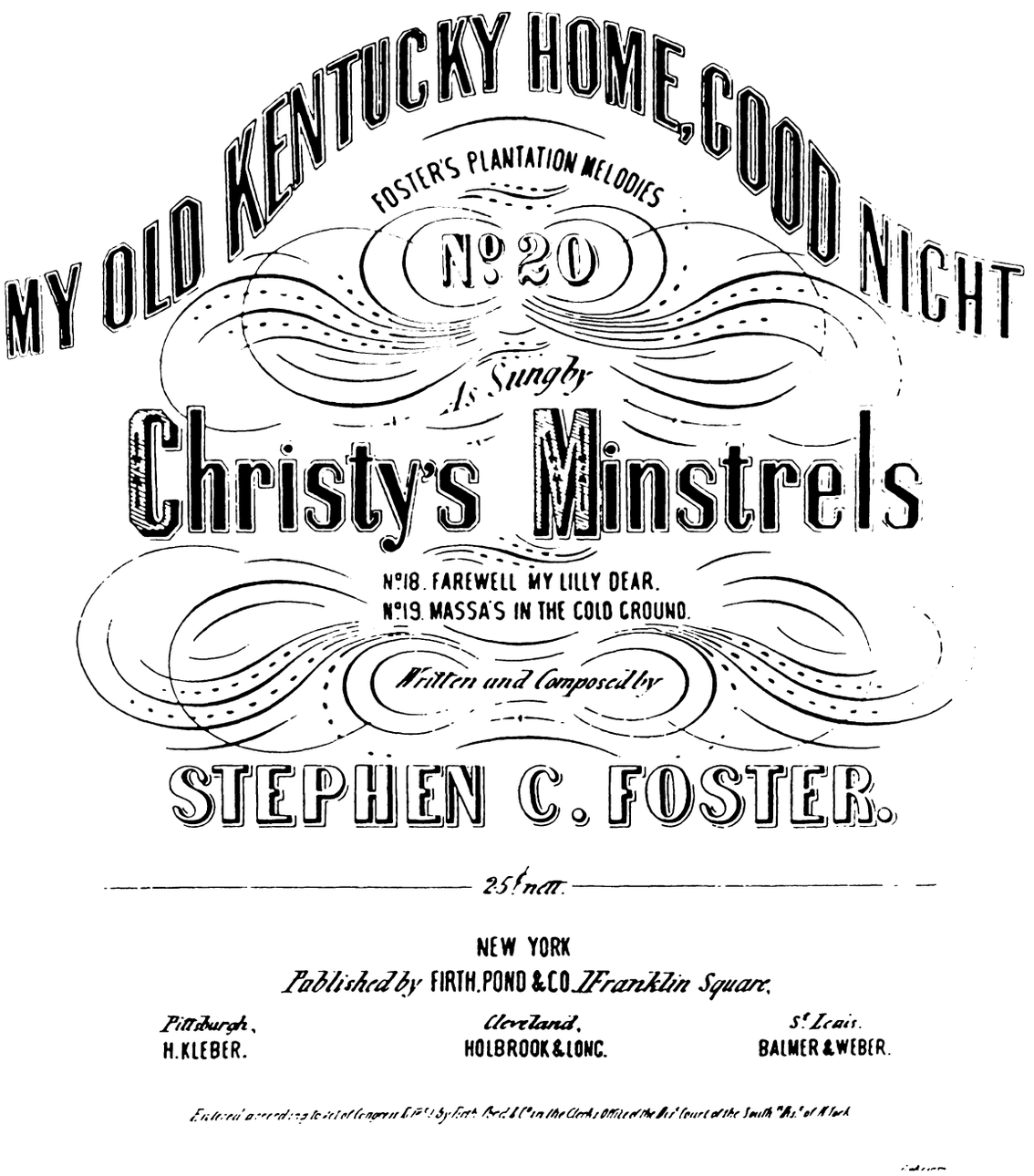

Figure 4. Frontispiece to "My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night."

Figure 5. Frontispiece to "Ellen Bayne."

"Ellen Bayne," "Little Ella," "Old Memories," and a cottage such as "My Old Kentucky Home."

He gradually dropped from these songs the use of terms that could be deemed offensive. But the term "darky" that still appears in "My Old Kentucky Home" and "Old Folks At Home" was apparently used within the black community in Pittsburgh at the time. He felt it appropriate to use "darky" as the most endearing term available, roughly the equivalent of "brother" or "comrade." He also softened the dialect, which in any case in his songs had been an attempt to replicate speech rather than to caricature it. By the time of "My Old Kentucky Home" (1853) there is no more dialect, the transition is complete.

Foster's most lastingly popular songs stem from that effort to clean up the minstrel stage by writing songs that elevated it to a higher plain. As Charles Hamm has shown in his book, *Music in the New World*, Foster was able to create original, distinctively American music by combining elements from various national or ethnic styles that were circulating in the country. The result was a music not unfamiliar to any one of those groups, recognized as being American, and inconceivable for any other country because the latter didn't have the cultural mix that we do in this country. Foster was trying to reach the widest possible public. He did know what he was about.

Foster did the same with his texts. He studied the themes of imported styles, for example, of the Irish songs, English ballads, Italian operas, and African-American spirituals. He found the common themes, the pain of leaving a loved one back home and coming to a new land (even if in "Nelly Was a Lady" the new land was the Mississippi River) perhaps never to see each other again; the longing for self-determination, free from political oppression; the right to live in dignity and to die in peace; the longing to be surrounded by family amidst the oppressive lonesomeness of life. These were the themes of his songs, whether ostensibly about a wife waiting for a husband lost at sea or about a slave in the South.

These observations about Foster's music and letters run counter to what Morrison would have us believe. I find no evidence in the original sources that Stephen Foster was ever a proponent of the old-order South or, as recent authors have claimed, an apologist for or even a glorifier of plantation life.

As to the myth that his artist's mind was incapable of prudent fiscal management, we have but to know his account book, his success as a bookkeeper for his brother, his contracts in his own hand that set out the royalties and details of his publisher's relationship, exactly which titles were going to give him ten percent, which titles fifteen percent. Fortunately the publishers did not return those contracts to the family but deposited them in the Library of Congress. Yes, it is true that he borrowed from family, from publisher, and that he died with only 38 cents in his pocket. But he was the first person to attempt to earn his living solely from the sale of his music to the public, and there were no performing-rights organizations to collect fees for his songs if they were used in public.

Recordings and radios, of course, were not invented yet. Those are very

lucrative media for modern-day composers. And copyright laws were of little help: for example, the Foster Hall Collection has editions of "Susanna" by twenty-eight different publishers issued during Stephen's lifetime; only one of them was the authorized publisher, only one of them paid him for the song.

And the third myth, that of the untutored genius, is the hardest to disprove, since the relationship between genius and good sense, between tutoring and practice, is impossible to delineate. Just briefly let me point out that Foster did have a mentor in Pittsburgh, someone with music training in Germany. Foster was not well versed in the terminology of music theory, but we know that he had a very wide acquaintance with the European masters through other evidence (especially his selections for arrangement in The Social Orchestra). He reveals much through his copybook which, by the way, comes down to us though his wife Jane, who gave it to her daughter, who in turn gave it to the Foster Hall Collection in the 1930s (It was outside Morrison's reach). It provides evidence that Stephen rented an office in 1851 right after he was married, rented a piano to go in it, and spent his days there writing out drafts and contacting his publishers, all in all a very business-like approach to song-writing.

All this makes it hard for me to believe in the naive, spontaneous-genius image that Morrison presents. Foster was a pioneering professional in a profession that didn't exist yet. A songwriter who knew what he wanted to create. Sometimes he succeeded far beyond his expectations. More often the results were mediocre. He wrote, after all, over two hundred works, and about thirty of them really achieved success. But what songwriter hasn't had such a share of disappointments in his career?

My purpose in this talk is not to accuse or castigate. It's rather to point out that we have been allowed to see only certain aspects of Stephen Foster's character, his motivations, only selected glimpses of his life events, modulated or even polarized views of his intentions for his music and his poetry. Our history, in other words, has been as much myth as fact. And this would perhaps be of little import if the composer were not so important to American music. He was and is arguably the most famous American composer of the century. He affected the lives of everybody during his time, and he still affects our lives today. He is the best-known American composer—perhaps the best-known American name—in Japan and China, one of our greatest cultural exports. We must understand him better if we would understand our own culture, and we must read our historical sources, all of them, carefully, if we would push beyond the myth to fuller historical understanding.

REFERENCES

Austin, William W. 1987. *"Susanna," "Jeanie," and "The Old Folks at Home": The Songs of Stephen Foster from His Time to Ours*. 2nd ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Foster Hall Collection, University of Pittsburgh. Thirty thousand items representing the songs and images of Stephen Foster as they have spread throughout world culture.

Foster, Morrison. 1896. *Biography, Songs and Musical Compositions of Stephen C. Foster*. Pittsburgh: Percy F Smith. Biography reprinted as My Brother Stephen. Indianapolis: [Josiah K. Lilly], 1932.

Hamm, Charles. 1983. *Music in the New World*. New York: Norton.

_____. 1986. "Popular Music, II, 5: Stephen Foster," *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*. Eds. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie. 4 vols. London and New York: MacMillan.

Hitchcock, H. Wiley. 1986. "Stephen Foster," *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*. Eds. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie. 4 vols. London and New York: MacMillan.

Hodges, Fletcher, Jr. 1948. "The Research Work of the Foster Hall Collection," *Pennsylvania History* XV/3 (July): 4-5.

Howard, John Tasker. 1934. *Stephen Foster: America's Troubadour*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell. Rev. ed., New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1953.

Morneweck, Evelyn Foster. 1944. *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*. 2 vols. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.