

Heir to slave-trade fortune confronts the family's legacy in eye-opening narrative

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In 1837, James DeWolf died as the second-richest man in America. A former U.S. senator from Rhode Island, he ran the most successful slave-trading operation in U.S. history. The DeWolf family was directly responsible for transporting more than 10,000 African people to the West Indies and the Americas.

Katrina Browne, a DeWolf descendant, gathered together a group of her distant cousins to make a documentary exploring the legacies of slavery. Thomas Norman DeWolf, a former Deschutes County commissioner who also served on the Oregon Arts Commission, was one of them. DeWolf's book, "Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U.S. History," is an eye-opening volume. It not only dispels myths about slavery but also shows how that history haunts this country to this day.

For the DeWolf descendants, the journey starts in Bristol, R.I., a prosperous community where traces of the pervasive trade in people have been utterly erased. Together with a film crew, the family members move on to Ghana. They spend time in the slave forts, going through the rooms in which slaves were kept prior to the ocean voyage. The effect is sobering, especially when the lights in one of those chambers unexpectedly go out. "I imagine being here two hundred years ago with no lights, no comforts," DeWolf writes. "Only those three small holes far above connect me with the world outside this hard room and stifling heat." He likens the past to a rotting corpse that has just been exhumed.

The travelers move on to Cuba, to see the remains of DeWolf family plantations, which openly traded in rum, molasses and people after the U.S. slave trade had been banned. At times, emotions run high as family members try to express their feelings about this journey, their guilt, sorrow and changes of heart. DeWolf concludes that privilege allows whites the comfort of not confronting these difficult issues, yet they are still there. The only way to heal these festering wounds is to "commit ourselves to becoming aware, to listening to each other's stories, embracing the truth, and recognizing and honoring each other's humanity."

Katie Schneider reviews books about the Pacific Northwest for The Oregonian.

Reading: DeWolf discusses "Inheriting the Trade" at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside St.