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Contact: Caitlin Meyer
617-948-6584
cmeyer@beacon.org

“DeWolf’s intimate confrontation with white America’s ‘unearned privilege’ sears the conscience.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

INHERITING THE TRADE

A NORTHERN FAMILY CONFRONTS ITS LEGACY AS THE
LARGEST SLAVE-TRADING DYNASTY IN US HISTORY

BY THOMAS NORMAN DEWOLF

Publication Date: January 9th, 2008

In 2001, at the age of forty-seven, Thomas Norman DeWolf accepted an invitation that would ultimately change his life. Katrina Browne, DeWolf’s cousin, had plans to produce and direct a documentary feature film about their shared family history and was seeking relatives to participate in her project. As DeWolf traced his ancestry and learned more about Browne’s film, *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North* (now an Official Competition Selection in the 2008 Sundance Film Festival), he discovered startling links to a notorious lineage: The DeWolf family of Bristol, Rhode Island was the largest slave-trading dynasty in early America.

In order to better understand her familial legacy and the subsequent privilege attached to it, as well as to consider the deep impact of the institution of slavery on the United States as a nation and Americans as individuals, Katrina Browne invited DeWolf ancestors to retrace the steps of the infamous Triangle Trade – from Bristol to Ghana to Cuba – to confront the past head-on. Ten cousins, including Browne and DeWolf, accepted this challenge. In *Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U.S. History*, Thomas DeWolf recounts this life-altering experience, reflecting not only upon the North’s involvement in slavery and the national legacy it has left behind, but also upon his own preconceived notions of race, white privilege, and prejudice.

U.S. senator and global businessman, James DeWolf was most responsible for the family’s prosperity and influence and reportedly died the second richest man in America in 1837. Primarily after the Revolutionary War, James "attained great wealth and influence through shipping, privateering, and the trading of rum for African people." But he didn’t do it alone. The slave trade was a family business that in turn shaped the town of Bristol as well as the economy of Greater New England. Five of James’ brothers and one son sailed in the trade. DeWolf explains that the family “financed eighty-eight voyages, which transported approximately ten thousand Africans. Alone, or in partnership with others, the DeWolf family was accountable for almost 60 percent of all African voyages sailing from Bristol.” Records indicate that the

DeWolfs, known colloquially as “The Great Folks” in their era, continued involvement in the slave trade even after its abolition in the U.S. in 1808.

Quite often in history texts the Northern states are portrayed as moral beacons and abolitionists, while the Southern states bear the burden of blame for the horrors of slavery. Yet this simplified dichotomy, DeWolf observes, glosses over the truly complicated and pervasive character of the institution. In *Inheriting the Trade*, DeWolf, who had little previous experience dealing with issues of race, explores the extent to which Northerners complied with and participated, actively or passively, in the institution of slavery. Noting that “the impact of race is so much greater and more deeply ingrained in our collective psyche than I ever realized,” DeWolf shares his own internal struggle with America’s historic amnesia regarding slavery, and offers insight into the distinct backgrounds and individual thought processes of each of his cousins.

At each stage of their journey, the “Family of Ten” physically and psychologically encounters the past by visiting landmarks, participating in local cultural experiences, consulting academic experts, and reflecting in discussion groups. In Bristol, they revisit both the warehouse where James kept his offices and the elegant DeWolf mansion, Linden Place, read aged letters describing the exchange of money for humans, and face artifacts such as the manacles used on slaves. The realities of the DeWolf dynasty become palpable and concrete.

In Ghana, the opportunity to consider the explicit violence of the slave trade and resulting racial disparities surfaces again as the cousins participate in community discussion groups and attend Panafest, the Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival. The festival draws a global audience in celebration of African history, art, and culture, as well as commemorates Emancipation Day with a “Slave Route Pilgrimage,” which traces the paths enslaved Africans took from Northern Ghana to the waiting dungeons at Cape Coast.

The magnitude and intensity of the journey is amplified as the cousins enter the dungeons at Cape Coast and Elmina castles, which served as the holding grounds and portals to the Middle Passage. As DeWolf sits in complete darkness in the cell, a 450 square foot space with little ventilation that would have held up to 200 men, and with the ocean surf crashing against the walls, he is terrified: “For the first moment in my life I have an inkling of what total despair feels like. Unimaginable horror envelops me, pierces me. Tears stream down my cheeks. I also know I am a white man in the year 2001. . . I can’t know the real horror of this place, comprehend the totality of the loss, the despair. I feel worse, more alone than I have ever felt in my life. Yet I am only scratching the surface of the scar.”

Tours of the slave quarters of a sugar plantation and the ruins of the crumbling DeWolf estate are juxtaposed with lavish meals, amenities, drinks, and dancing in Cuba. While this disconnection sparks turmoil amongst the Family of Ten as some feel the need for heightened honesty and focus, it also leaves the travelers poised to consider what will come next. How will the lessons of ten cousins translate into daily lives, and how can healing and reconciliation begin?

In illuminating the extremely complicated history of the U.S. Slave Trade and considering systematic racism and its insidious effects, *Inheriting the Trade* shows readers that, as Americans, we all share the legacy of slavery. DeWolf encourages dialogue, education, and personal examination. He writes, “In recounting my journey with nine distant cousins, my intent is to stimulate both reflection and serious conversation. There are no simple answers. But if we don’t confront these challenging issues, we will resolve nothing . . . In [raising awareness], we will finally break through the scars to clean the living wound properly and begin the healing . . . together.”

About the Author: Thomas Norman DeWolf served on the Oregon Arts Commission for nine years and as a local elected official for eleven. His years of public service focused on the arts, literacy, children’s issues, and restorative justice. Tom and his wife, Lindi, live in Oregon.

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*Inheriting the Trade*Thomas Norman DeWolf*

January 9th, 2008\$24.95 Cloth*978-0-8070-7281-3*