

the lifestyle.” And yet, even as the author delights in J. K. Huysmans’s *A Rebours*, “the acknowledged bible of decadence,” he notes that Huysmans later “took instruction at a monastery and converted to Catholicism. As Barbey d’Aureville said when he read *A Rebours*, ‘After such a book, the only choice left open to the author is between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross.’”

Classics for Pleasure is itself a pleasure to dip into any time. Like the key that opens up the door to *The Secret Garden*, it provides easy entry to a colorful array of literary gems. If you are working up a reading list for the new year, Dirda is a good friend to consult.

Paul Contino

A Shameful Heritage

Inheriting the Trade

A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U.S. History

By Thomas Norman DeWolf

Beacon Press. 272p \$24.95

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While Thomas Norman DeWolf’s 18-chapter memoir, *Inheriting the Trade*, accomplishes an artful merging of historical explication with biography and travelogue, not until Chapter 16 does the author’s central thesis emerge. Only then, when DeWolf informs readers of his own abuse of privilege and gender in two sexual harassment episodes he initiated, does he postulate that “people have parallel experiences and that’s how we connect with what we need to learn. This ordeal was my parallel experience.... In my world systemic sexism is the closest parallel to systemic racism. My ordeal helped me to understand both more clearly.”

Unlike his ancestors, who rescripted their history by burying their slave-trading enterprise beneath their flattering appellation as “The Great Folks,” generations of “philanthropists, ministers, bishops, writers, professors, artists, and architects—upright Yankees and leading citizens,” DeWolf comes to terms in his own lifetime with what he recognizes as complicity in his family’s historical lie. Making no

excuses for his destructive choices, he takes his place along a timeline of privilege, defining himself as both beneficiary and victim of his inheritance:

As I sit here, I can’t think of anything that didn’t come to me as a result of someone else’s kindness, a connection, a privilege, a shortcut, or an advantage of some kind. One of the many ironies of my privilege is that I can’t get rid of it. Even in fighting racism, my privilege gets me heard. On the flip side, if you’re a white person reading these words, your privilege allows, and even encourages, you to ignore them.

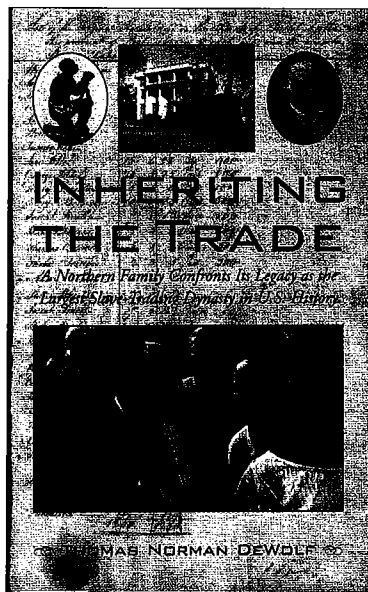
Herein lies the memoir’s greatest strength. Throughout *Inheriting the Trade*, DeWolf challenges readers, most of us privileged by our very literacy, to join him in examining our own lives, our own implicit and explicit exploitative behaviors toward those most vulnerable in our particular circumstances. He contends that oppression hurts all, not just those enslaved but the enslavers as well. “Oppressors are damaged by what they perpetrate against others,” the author acknowledges, “but it’s not just the oppressors and their victims who suffer. Like a stone dropped into a pond, the consequences of oppression ripple out in all directions, impacting everything and everyone.”

To support his conviction, DeWolf introduces readers to Kevin Jordan, an expert in historic preservation at Rhode Island’s Roger Williams University. Jordan’s analogy between the slave trade and the Holocaust offers both DeWolf and his readers a rationale for collective responsibility. As Jordan puts it:

You can’t understand Bristol [Rhode Island] without understanding its role in the slave trade. You can’t understand America

without understanding what the slave trade did for it. It’s equivalent to saying, “if there hadn’t been a Hitler there wouldn’t have been a German Holocaust.” Except that Hitler never personally killed anyone. Six million Jews were killed by someone and it wasn’t Hitler. At Dachau, the whole town said, “We didn’t know it was there,” but the town lived off it. So you can blame Hitler if you want. Clearly he set an ideology. You can blame Colt or General George DeWolf, but they were sharing an ideology. It’s part and parcel of the whole culture. Until slavery is seen in that light, we’re ignoring the whole framework.

DeWolf cites “material greed” as the primary motivation for slavery of any kind, then connects his ancestral involve-



ment in the slave trade with the nation’s, offering numerous historical references to illustrate his point. In one anecdote, he cites Joanne Pope Melish, the author of *Disowning Slavery*, who reminds us that “the economic and moral involvement of New England society in the slave trade was spread broadly across classes. It means people like me were thinking that it was reasonable to make a bit of a profit on black bodies. They were ordinary people,

whose descendants, like you, are everywhere.”

The buying and selling of Africans figured as the major economic determinant of the United States. Even Thomas Jefferson, who in the Declaration of Independence wrote passionately against King George III’s enslavement practices (“...he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their

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transportation thither”), named the evil and continued to own slaves himself. DeWolf alleges he and we are no different if we collectively frame the world as opposition between “us” and “them.”

DeWolf’s memoir merits inclusion on reading lists for students of American history, race relations and spiritual growth. Replete with well-documented, disturbing facts (“The DeWolfs 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, making them the largest slave-trading dynasty in early America.”), the text also retraces the author’s slave-trading route with nine cousins in 2001. Led by filmmaker Katrina Browne, whose film “Traces of the Trade: A Story From the Deep North” is a contender in the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, the journey exposed the 10 DeWolf cousins to the physical realities of the trade and the ongoing consequences of its brutality.

In the book’s second chapter, DeWolf describes his ancestors and their neighbors as “churchgoing folks who were involved in the slave trade.” This realization—that churches are filled with sinners—made him loath to participate fully in Episcopal rites. By memoir’s end, however, DeWolf tells us,

I’ve come to realize the obvious: churches reflect the people who worship inside. They, me, my ancestors, all of us: we’re flawed, damaged people. We seek fulfilling relationships, understanding, and grace. Choices made in the past created our present condition. Choices made in this moment create our future and the legacy we’ll pass on to our grandchildren’s grandchildren.

Wise words from a man whose children and grandchildren inherit here a chapter of their history marked by understanding, contrition and graceful renewal.

Mary Donnarumma Shamick

An audio interview with Peter Schineller, S.J., a new associate editor at America, at americamagazine.org.



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