

Books

Hidden Chains: the Slavery Business and North East England, 1600-1865

By locating the history and social geography of slavery in one single area, this book succeeds where a host of other initiatives have not, writes *SI Martin*

Commemorations in 2007 for the bicentenary of the passage of the 1807 Slave Trade Act saw British museums present their users with an abundance of exhibitions, performances, seminars and publications by way of heightening awareness of the traffic in human lives across the Atlantic and this nation's part in it.

Some events were naked exercises in box-ticking and funding fulfilment, several were marked by a strain of self-congratulation, while all too many sought to promote the road to abolition's celebratory aspects.

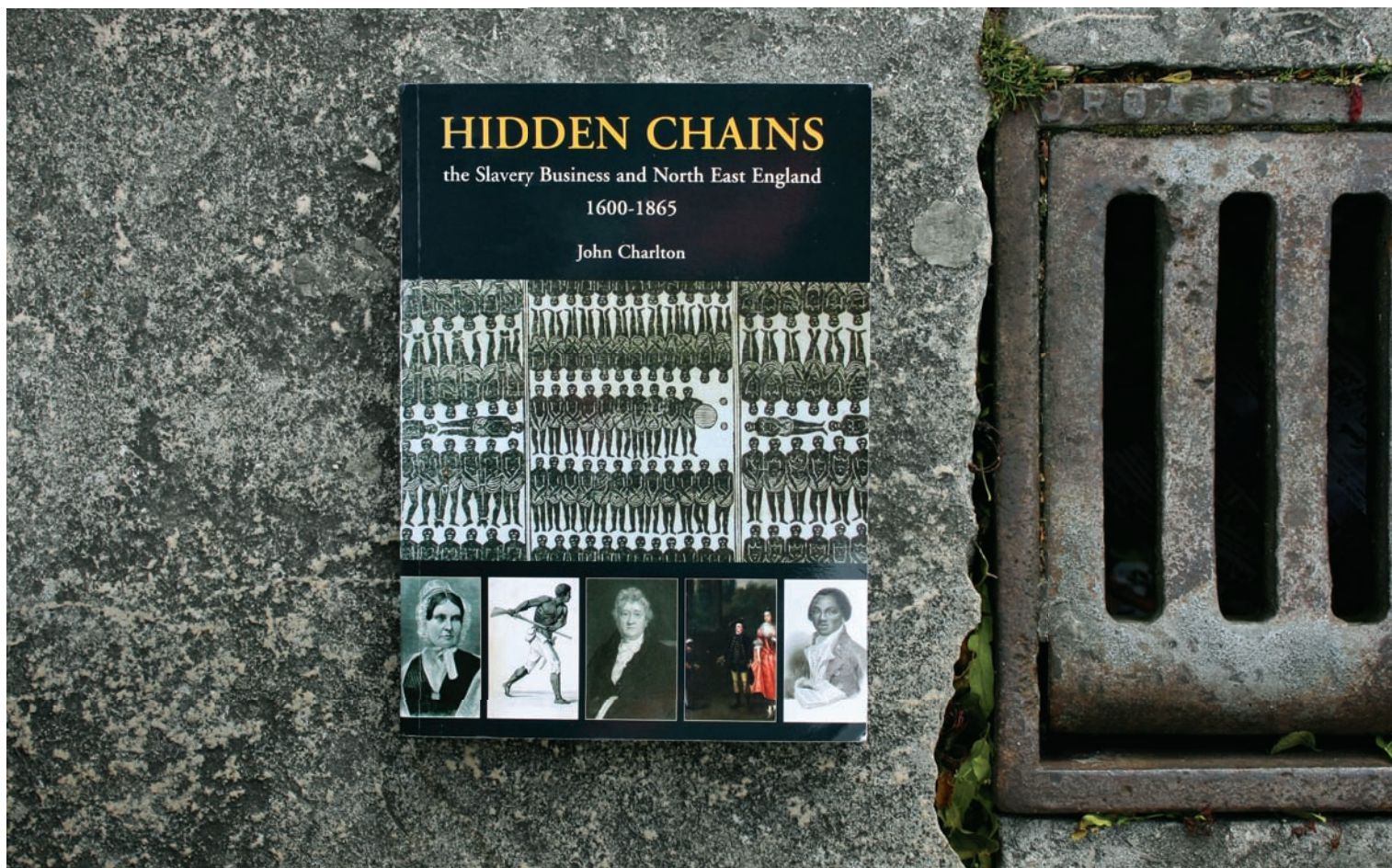
Apart from a small number of books and exhibitions, 2007 fell short of offering what James Walvin, an expert in the slave trade, describes in his foreword to John Charlton's *Hidden Chains* as "the chance to rethink a critical moment in British (and British global) history". Instead, a lack of serious public discussion and a lack of commitment to continuous research and community involvement threatened to turn it into a year-long Black History Month. *Hidden Chains* is a corrective offshoot from that year, and all the more welcome because

it is just one aspect of the remarkable work set in motion by the North East Slavery and Abolition Group (NESAG).

NESAG grew out of the concerns of volunteers on the Tyneside Remembering Slavery project. They wanted to ensure that the research uncovered in 2007 should be recycled throughout the north east through a series of activities, including newsletters, theatre, small exhibitions and discussion groups in villages and towns. These events have attracted the participation of almost 18,000 young people as well as archivists, local historians and volunteers. The work continues.

Hidden Chains draws our gaze away from the familiar stretches of the Thames, the Mersey and the Avon to the Tyne, where Charlton reveals how, despite Newcastle's comparatively modest shipbuilding, fishing and coal interests, it rapidly established itself as "one of the most important towns and seaports in the age of colonial slavery".

Where this account excels is in the teasing out of disparate areas of commerce. Charlton ably



shows how regional businesses such as coal, wrought iron and merchant shipping were essential to the trade in human lives across the Atlantic, and, indeed, flourished in its service. The book is particularly good at revealing the hidden chains of “silence and politeness” which “enabled abolitionists and slavers to live and socialise alongside each other” in Newcastle as they did in London and Liverpool.

America looms large in Hidden Chains. Yet Charlton avoids superimposing North American abolitionist narratives onto antislavery struggles within the British Empire. By maintaining a firm Tyneside perspective, he manages to introduce both histories through the lives of men and women who left these shores.

As the demand for enslaved African labour grew, so did the anti-slavery movement. Like elsewhere in Britain, Tyneside witnessed an unlikely grouping of women, clergymen, workers, MPs and others creating the modern protestor’s toolkit of boycotts, slogans, petitioning and lobbying in what was the first genuine mass movement in British history.

On 1 April 1832, Mary Ann Macham was baptised at the Howard Street Baptist church in North Shields. The admission describes her as a “slave but escaped to this country... from Richmond Chesterfield, County Virginia”. Also living in the north east of England at that time was the ferryman William Fifield, originally from St Kitts, who, at his death in 1834, had been in Newcastle for 40 years.

Current research from all over the UK continues to reveal the historic presence of people of African origin, many of whose lives here were a direct result of the transatlantic slave trade. First-person black testimony from the plantations and elsewhere is a significant missing link in a book which otherwise is an exemplary examination of the regional impact of the slave trade and offers timely insights into the global and collective repercussions that can result from local and individual decisions.

By John Charlton, £10, Tyneside Publishing, ISBN 978-1857951233

SI Martin is an author

On my bookshelf

Joe Traynor

The Name of the Rose, by Umberto Eco



The Name of the Rose has been a favourite of mine since I read it nearly 15 years ago. It combines a whodunit, a good detective, a trusty side-kick, a medieval monastery, nice architecture, a huge library, murderous monks, demonic possession and the end of the world. What more could anyone want from a book?

My earliest encounters with heritage were the cathedrals and castles that I visited with my family as I was growing up. I remember being fascinated by who lived there, what they looked like, what happened there and how things have changed. I suppose this set me on the way to where I am today.

William Baskerville is the Sherlock Holmes-type monastic sleuth, aided by Adso, his young assistant, novice and narrator of

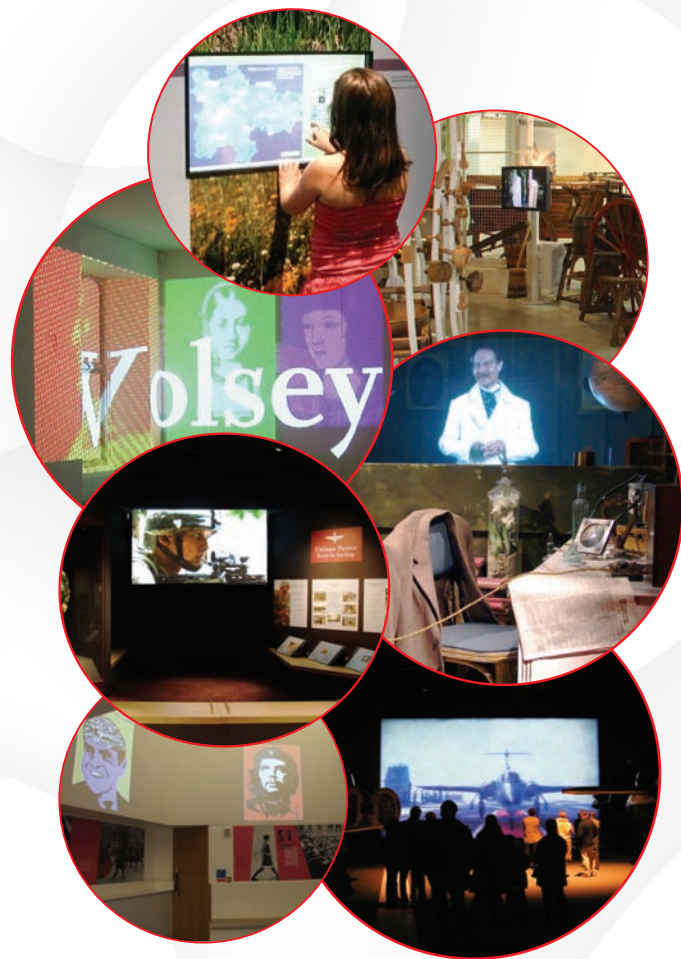
the tale. Together they explore the monastery and labyrinthine library in search of Aristotle’s Book of Comedy, which seems to hold the key to the murders that are taking place, a result of suspected demonic possession. Baskerville applies reason and logic, using the new fashionable 14th-century scholastic method of deductive reasoning, a method that we have cunningly carried through to the 21st century.

When asked why he chose The Name of the Rose as the book’s title, Eco said: “Because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that, by now, it hardly has any meaning left.” Sometimes helpful interpretation can also tease out an elusive meaning for the overwhelmed museum visitor.

Joe Traynor is the senior officer museums at West Dunbartonshire Council

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