

### Let The Rope Speak: Nat Turner's Revolt Became A Stirring Symbol For North And South Alike

Tony Horwitz

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## Review

### LET THE ROPE SPEAK

#### Nat Turner's revolt became a stirring symbol for North and South alike

Horwitz, Tony

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**Davis, Mary Kemp** *Nat Turner Before the Bar of Judgment: Fictional Treatments of the Southampton Slave Insurrection.* Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 807122491

Nat Turner was hanged 30 years before the firing on Fort Sumter, but the slave rebellion that bears his name helped bring on the Civil War.

In the course of a two-day rampage in August 1831, Turner and a band of fellow blacks, both free and slave, killed 55 whites in Southampton County, Virginia, many of them women and children. The rebellion was quickly put down, vigilantes killed several hundred blacks in reprisal, and many of those who took part in the uprising were quickly tried and executed. But the legacy of America's most sustained and successful slave revolt was profound.

The Virginia legislature, which had edged towards debate over emancipation, instead clamped down on both free and enslaved blacks with a series of harsh measures restricting the movement and education of African Americans. And the general terror caused by Nat Turner's revolt hardened attitudes and anti-slave measures across the South.

The revolt also energized Northern abolitionists, offering proof that blacks desperately desired their own freedom and would fight and die for it. In the decades that followed, figures such as John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher Stowe would look to Nat Turner as an inspiration in the fight to end America's "peculiar institution." Nor did Turner's legacy end with the Civil War. He has remained a touchstone for debate about the legitimacy of violence and the nation's continuing struggle to understand and make amends for slavery.

It is therefore fitting that Mary Kemp Davis looks at Nat Turner not so much as a historical figure, but as a cultural symbol whose meaning has changed in the 168 years since the Southampton insurrection. We know very little about Turner himself, and given the scarcity of sources beyond the trial records and Turner's "confession," we may never know for sure whether he masterminded the rebellion or if there was a wider conspiracy.

These "lacun in the historical record" have only added to Turner's potency, allowing Americans to see in him what they want. Is he a freedom fighter or homicidal madman? A bold man of action or the tortured spiritualist of William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*? A man who helped blacks gain their freedom, or one whose actions only tightened the chains of enslavement?

An English professor at Florida A & M University, Davis weaves together history and literary criticism as she examines Turner's portrayal in a number of texts, from contemporaneous accounts to Styron's acclaimed and controversial novel published in 1967. For readers interested in the rebellion and its murky history, the first 75 pages of Davis's book are a valuable contribution, a lucid and discerning survey of the various sources and their reliability, or lack thereof. She shows that the traditional view of Turner as a charismatic religious "madman" who led a localized uprising is only one of several possibilities that can be deduced from the slim and often contradictory historical record. Curiously, the trials of a number of other co-conspirators before Turner's capture make little mention of him, nor do they highlight his spiritualism. And inadequate attention has been paid to the abolitionist ferment against which Turner's revolt played out.

This reader, however, found much of the rest of Davis's book hard going. Several of the fictional works she treats are obscure, and she provides little reason why they should be rediscovered. More problematic is the dense theoretical language infusing Davis's work, which is filled with words like "praxis," "overdetermined," and "dialogically," and sentences such as: "The 'Fragment of a memory' in Styron's *Confessions* is hieroglyphic and encoded. It creates multiple signifying texts that issue a 'call' for a signifying response."

Davis's work is nonetheless a provocative re-examination of Turner and the long shadow he has cast. The author's central thesis is that "Nat Turner has been rearraigned, retried, and resented many times during the last century and a half." By raising and exploring key questions about our understanding of Turner,

Davis insures that he will indeed continue to be retried, and that, like the Civil War, the Southampton slave uprising will be an event that each generation must examine and interpret by its own light.

*Tony Horwitz is author of Confederates in the Attic.*