

The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt

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Review

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A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt

The Nat Turner uprising in Virginia in August 1831 was, in its consequences if not in the actual numbers involved, the most significant slave revolt in U.S. history. As Patrick Breen writes in his new study, it contributed mightily to the radicalization of American politics. It left behind Turner's own account in the remarkable *Confessions of Nat Turner*, and it has echoed long afterwards in novels, plays, and films – most notably, the 1967 novel by William Styron, also called *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which inspired in turn a torrent of criticism from African American scholars and writers. Breen also writes that the revolt “has inspired relatively little scholarly attention,” (2) which is a fair statement until quite recently. Aside from collections of documents, book-length studies by historians include an 1899 dissertation by William Sidney Drewry, a historian of the Phillips school; a 1930s master's thesis by leftist radical Herbert Aptheker, which was published in 1966; and a short 1975 biography of Turner by Stephen B. Oates, who indulged in a good deal of novelistic invention to fill in unknowns.

In the 1990s, scholarly attention to the revolt revived, although mainly from scholars of literature; even a 2004 book by historian Scot French focused on how the revolt was remembered and written about, rather than on the uprising itself. However, work by historian Kenneth S. Greenberg did provoke new attention to the events of 1831. Greenberg brought out a new edition of the original *Confessions of Nat Turner*, contributed to a television documentary, and edited a collection of essays, including one of his own, in 2003. Greenberg's collection included chapters by two historians who had begun work on the revolt, one by David F. Allmendinger, Jr., and the other by Breen, who was writing on the revolt for his dissertation. More than a decade later, Allmendinger and Breen published their book-length studies: Allmendinger, in *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County* (2014), and Breen in the book under review.

Both Allmendinger and Breen spent years combing through censuses, tax returns, probate records, newspaper accounts, and court testimony to track down information on the week of the uprising – the who, what, where, when, and how. They reached different conclusions regarding some details, such as the authorship of an anonymous public letter and the likely name of Nat Turner's wife, but on the big issues, they largely agree. Perhaps the biggest is that the core of the original *Confessions* was not, as some have argued, mainly the work of lawyer Thomas R. Gray, who took the story down and published it, but instead represents the authentic voice of Nat

Turner himself, in both its language and in its explanation of who he was and why he acted. Turner, it seems, was one of those figures that have arisen from time to time in the history of Christianity, convinced by dreams and revelations that they had a special mission from God to bring about, by violence, a true liberation of the downtrodden. (Another example is Anabaptist preacher and baker Jan Matthys, who led twelve men out from Münster in 1534 in the belief that they would, like Gideon's Band, disperse a besieging army of thousands.)

Breen and Allmendinger also agree on the basic facts of the uprising – the sequence of events, number of participants (perhaps 60, depending on how one counts “participation”), and the number of white victims (probably 55). They agree, too, that the number of African Americans killed in the aftermath without trial by vengeful whites was fewer than 40, a much smaller number than the hundred, or even hundreds, offered in earlier estimates. Finally, both argue that the actions of Turner and his band were not mindless, but purposeful, even if Turner's apparent expectation that most of Southampton's slaves would rise with him was mistaken.

Breen, however, goes well beyond Allmendinger on two issues. Both whites and African Americans in Southampton, he points out, were divided in the crisis. If perhaps five dozen blacks, slave and free, actively participated, the overwhelming majority of Southampton's 7,700 slaves and 1,700 free blacks did not, and at least a few actively assisted whites in some way or another. Here, Breen argues that neither “resistance” nor “accommodation” explains the African American response; instead, he appeals to W. E. Du Bois's famous analysis of African Americans as marked by “a peculiar sensation” of “double-consciousness,” a “sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others.” This idea, Breen thinks, “allows for ambiguities that appeared among people who were trying to think of ways to respond to” enslavement, and can “help explain how slaves thought about their world.” (7)

Breen argues that whites were divided as well, in this case between the majority of non-slaveholders who sought mainly revenge against blacks, innocent and guilty alike, and the county's slaveholders, who wanted to tamp down white violence and convince the public that “the revolt was small, it had little support from the black community, and it posed no real threat to whites.” (10) Elite whites called out the militia both to put down the revolt and to restrain white retaliation. Arrested suspects were then tried in regular courts controlled by Southampton's elite slaveholders. The trials themselves were genuine, with defense lawyers and careful examination of testimony. Ultimately, of 49 men and one woman charged, just 19 were hanged, 19 others were found not guilty or had their cases dismissed, and the rest were transported out of state. Breen calls on the concept of “hegemony,” associated of course with the work of Eugene Genovese, to explain this control of the situation by elite slaveholders. It was this hegemonic control that prevented what one contemporary editor feared would be “the extermination of the whole black population.” (9)

Neither of these theoretical interventions (double-consciousness or hegemony) helps as much as Breen thinks. Du Bois's double consciousness concerned what was, in his mind, a spiritual problem of identity faced by African Americans after the Civil War: “One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” Except for the extraordinary *Confessions*, surviving

documents offer almost no insight into the self-consciousness of Southampton's enslaved people. Most of them probably realized that the revolt would end in the deaths, not of slavery, but of many slaves; their pragmatic decision to remain aloof tells us little about their fundamental sense of identity. Du Bois himself, in his famous essay, wrote of slaves that "few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice In song and exhortation swelled one refrain – Liberty." No double-consciousness there!

As for "hegemony," while the prospect of "extermination" regularly appeared in white rhetoric whenever fears of a "race war" spiked, there is little reason to think that a significant number of non-slaveholders actually contemplated anything like genocide. No doubt intervention by the militia kept down the number of slaves killed without trial, but, all things considered, the elite description of the revolt as small, lacking broad support, and not a fundamental threat to white society, seems to fit the facts pretty well. Whites then made the mistake of thinking that, because slaves were not going to turn the South into another Haiti, they must actually be satisfied with their lot in life – a mistake that cost them dearly thirty years later.

Fortunately, Breen's account of events, and his discussion of divisions among both whites and African Americans, does not really depend on his theoretical arguments. With its nice balance of narrative and analysis, his thoroughly researched "new history" is now the best single account we have of the revolt and the trials that followed. Specialists will still want to read Allmendinger for his detailed tracing of Nat Turner's early life and of the connections between the rebels and the white victims, but his book tracks so closely to the primary sources that it is bound to be hard going for most general readers and undergraduates. It would make for an interesting graduate seminar to pair Breen and Allmendinger as approaches to the writing of history. It would make an interesting undergraduate class to pair Breen's book (and, of course, the original *Confessions*) with a showing of the recent film on the rebellion, *Birth of a Nation* – a film that strays much further from the known facts than Styron's novel ever did. It is hard to say that any treatment of an event like Turner's rebellion, where the surviving documents do not reach far into many issues, will ever be definitive. For most readers, though, Breen's book should be the place to start.

J. William Harris is Professor of History at the University of New Hampshire. Among his books are The Making of the American South: A Short History, 1500-1877, and The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah: A Free Black Man's Encounter with Liberty. He is currently working on history of the South since the Civil War for general readers. He can be contacted at jw.harris@unh.edu.