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The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia, is a first-hand account of Turner's confessions published by a local lawyer, Thomas Ruffin Gray, in 1831

The Confessions of Nat Turner Details

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From Reader Review The Confessions of Nat Turner for online ebook

Linds says

Short, succinct, account of the Nat Turner rebellion. What makes it special is that is an oral account by Nat Turner himself. He comes off as intelligent, articulate, charismatic, and a bit mystical. He is also oddly calm both about the previous rebellion and his upcoming execution. The interviewer of the time, a white southerner, gives off the impression and tries to convey a tone that he is interviewing a monster a la Charles Manson instead of the leader of a revolution.

For those that don't know in 1831 Nat Turner led a slave rebellion and killed 60 white southerners before it was put down. He is a controversial figure because during the rebellion he also killed several women, children, and infants, making history a bit hesitant in declaring him a hero.

The rebellion was "responsible" for a severe clamp down regarding slave's rights. Unfortunately a period of even heavier persecution followed, if that was even possible.

Christopher Sutch says

While reading this short pamphlet what occurred to me frequently was the question of its authenticity. Not that I wondered whether Nat Turner led a slave uprising in Virginia that resulted in several whites being slaughtered and many slaves, both those involved and those not involved in the uprising itself, being killed in retaliation by gangs of frightened slaveholders. But, rather, whether these "confessions" of Nat Turner, supposedly written down accurately by a white lawyer while Turner was in prison awaiting execution, are really Turner's words or not. Since this pamphlet contains the only information we'll likely ever have about Turner (primary evidence, that is), an answer to this question is unlikely. I just find it interesting that Turner supposedly suffered from "religious mania" and attributes his uprising to this source: he heard the voice of God or an angel tell him to do this (he was insane, in other words). Isn't it more likely that the inhumanity of the system caused a slave uprising (which is perfectly understandable) and that the white establishment, afraid of encouraging a similarly successful repetition (not to mention fueling the fires of Northern abolitionists by showing that slaves were actually NOT happy and singing people loving their masters) then manufactured some cock and bull story of one insane slave who led a revolt? Part of my ambivalent acceptance of this theory derives, in part, from the text of the "confessions," during which it appears that Turner "led" very little in terms of actual killing or action: during many (perhaps most of the killings) in the text, Turner was absent or not involved. I don't know. A historical curiosity, perhaps, but little of substantive value here.

Deborah says

Interesting to hear the story of the insurrection in Turner's own words. Of course historians debate on whether this is actually his own words or whether Thomas Gray took liberties with the story. Still it gives an interesting glimpse of additives and proceedings of the times.

John says

Read this before seeing the movie

The movie BIRTH OF A NATION has just been released, so I decided to read this short pamphlet prior to seeing the movie. If you read this pamphlet several things will catch your attention not the least is Nat Turner's religious experiences along with his extreme violence. The reader should be attentive also to his remarks about his own experiences of being a slave. Beware of judging an event when reading participants' views of events and later authors, screenwriters and actors view of events. History should not be judged by today's standards. It should be viewed in the time it occurred.

Eileen says

2.5 stars (ok)

In this book, Nat Turner relays what inspired him to initiate a slave rebellion and recounts the events that transpired as he and a few others attacked individuals in their homes. However, because this recitation was done verbally and was recorded in writing by another person, there is unfortunately no way to know how much of it is accurate and whether any of his statements were omitted or embellished so he would appear in a less favorable light.

Kenya says

Quick Read

This was a very quick read. It's interesting to learn of Nat Turner's thoughts before, during and after the rebellion. I do think the author put his own spin on some things, but it was an interesting read nonetheless.

Miles Smith says

One of the most enduring and important primary sources in the field of southern history. Despite describing a series of graphic murders in the United States' only successful slave rebellion, Turner nonetheless appears sympathetic in this account rendered by a Virginia magistrate. The rebellion led to a series of reactionary measures against enslaved persons and especially against free blacks across the South. It also instilled a not-unreasoned paranoia in the South that affected socio-political discourse for the next three decades.

Alex says

In 1831 Nat Turner led the largest slave uprising in American history, murdering 60 white men, women and children with a mob of slaves in Virginia. Some dude went and interviewed him in prison, and this claims to be his first-person account of his life and revolt.

The motives of the dude - a white slaveowner named Thomas Ruffin Gray - have been questioned quite a bit, as has the authenticity of the whole thing. There were a bunch of witnesses to the confession, but of course none who were sympathetic to Nat Turner's mission to murder all their babies. I like this piece about the Confessions. (Like any discussion of this primary source, it gets a bit wrapped up in Styron's Pulitzer-winning 1967 *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.) We're unlikely to get a definitive answer about this, but the tendency has been to more or less take it at its word. It feels to me like Gray has written down what Turner told him. (Along with a few "Holy shit!"-style asides.)

Turner, who taught himself to read at a young age and comes off as highly intelligent, claims that God communicates with him and ordered him to fight; what he describes matches pretty well with schizophrenia.

On the other hand, it also matches pretty well with God. "Go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child," He tells Samuel in 15:3-4. When asked, "Do you not find yourself mistaken now?" Turner answers, "Was not Christ crucified. And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work." It's a weird sentence structure, but you get the idea: only God knows the difference between a prophet and a schizophrenic.

Most of Turner's confession is a step-by-step, almost laconic description of the revolt itself. "Twas my object to carry terror and devastation wherever we went," he helpfully explains. As he goes he picks up a crowd of slaves, sometimes drunk, who (according to him) carried out most of the bloody work: "I sometimes got in sight in time to see the work of death completed, viewed the mangled bodies as they lay, in silent satisfaction, and immediately started in quest of other victims."

It's disturbing stuff. Worth reading? Sure, yeah; it's certainly not boring, and it's very short. As a (probable) primary source about the effects and events of slavery, it's interesting.

These actions are of course terrible, but then so is the institution of slavery that inspired them; they were technically a response in kind, so if you believe in an eye for an eye, you should have no problem with Nat Turner. It seems to me like we have to judge slavery first, and Turner's response to it second.

History has decided that Turner's rebellion was a bad idea: it led directly to the retributive murder of 200 slaves and the passage of new, even more restrictive laws prohibiting education and assembly, among other things. John Brown's rebellion in 1860, on the other hand, is given credit as a spark for the Civil War. And I don't know, maybe Brown's timing was more fortuitous and it's nice that he didn't murder any babies, but in general I'd say that both events were inevitable reactions to slavery. Turner pleaded not guilty to his charges, "saying to his counsel, that he did not feel so." Fair enough.

Jessaka says

I read this first when I was taking a black history class in college. I can't even recall what I thought of it back then. Well, yes I do. I remember wanting him to win. I also remember how sometimes the slaves fed their master's ground glass, and how on the slave ships many lived in their own excretions and many died. I

remember how the masters would use thump screws on their slaves in order to cause them pain, and I remember the whippings.

Nat Turner was a slave back in the 1830s and confesses that his master was really good to him, but at one time he actually ran away, stayed hidden for maybe a month and then returned. Just because you have a good master doesn't mean that you don't desire freedom. But what choice did he have except to return? Perhaps, he could have made it to a Northern State to freedom. Maybe not.

He was also a very religious man, a preacher. He believed that he had visions from God, and that God told him that he must take action against the slave owners. So in time he gathered up several other slaves and planned the insurrection.

Early one morning they visited the homes of those nearby. He was finally caught, and his confession of what happened was very grisly. They used axes to kill 57 men, women, and children, mostly women and children. I was horrified when reading the graphic details, and yet I understood why this had happened. Yet, it was morally wrong.

Insurrections were a constant worry for the slave owners, as they always feared that this could happen, and actually, Nat Turner's insurrection wasn't the first time that it had actually happened.

“Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”

~~Frederick Douglass

Kea-Kea Burton says

Educational

Educational part of history to know and understand the mindset of Nat Turner, his demeanor and why he did what he did. He was definitely ahead of his time. It's such a sad ending....his was hung, body was flayed and he was decapitated all for wanting basic human rights for himself and his people. Living during those times was horrific for blacks.

Chris says

I know there is debate about the legitimacy of these "confessions". That Gray, a white man, had a reason for writing the way he did. However, this edit does make an attempt to place the confessions in context, including photographs of slavery not just in the South, but also the slave trade itself. It is worth reading for anyone interested in slavery, American history, the Civil War.

Maurice Richard Weise says

Was not Christ crucified

From the second inaugural address

"For it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to the man by whom that offense cometh"

I decided to read the original because of dissatisfaction with a prime documentary which had quotes by Styron+other recent pundits. Abe quoting Christ seems to hit the bullseye.

While Nat and John Brown were the revolutionary vanguard, the prophetic function of their actions are hard to ignore. Turner's acts were suicidal, murderous, and brave; heroic they were not. Ahead of his time, he was.

As flawed and limited as this account from the time is, it is very remarkable. It may be as close as we ever come. This account hints at the depths at the layers of tragedy that make Styron's superficiality an embarrassment. Also, underlining momentary heroics or innocence does not change the fact of our search solutions less flawed than than Nat's or the response to him are not yet found.

Albert E Russell says

Great read

Nat Turner was a principled man, fed up with his oppression. If the recorder did so, accurately, his words are a haunting indictment of slavery and those who supported it.

Paul says

Actual rating: 2.5 stars.

This is the original "Confessions of Nat Turner," not the 1967 William Styron novel but a 24-page summary of an interview with the actual Nat Turner, written by Thomas R. Gray, a lawyer seeking to cash in on the sensation surrounding one of the few slave uprisings to occur in the American South.

Starting with six accomplices, Nat Turner led a short-lived revolt in the country near Southhampton, Virginia, in August, 1831. Starting in the dark of night, Turner and his group began going house to house, murdering white farmers and slave owners, many in their sleep. As more slaves joined along the way, Turner's army grew to 60 men. Over the next 36 hours, they killed 10 men, 14 women, and 31 infants and children. By noon of Tuesday, August 23, white militias had routed the revolt, killing, capturing, and dispersing Turner's army. Turner himself evaded capture for several weeks. Once caught, he was quickly tried, convicted, and hanged. Gray, who represented Turner at his trial, conducted his interview with Turner in jail and then published his pamphlet.

Gray says he quotes Nat Turner extensively, but it's hard to tell whether the words we read are his or Turner's: Gray didn't use quotation marks, and sentences that are clearly judgments on the part of Gray are mixed together with sentences purportedly uttered by Turner. It's no fun to read: Turner, an educated slave who could read and write, and who was a minister to fellow slaves, had been odd since childhood and thought his "revolution" was directed by God. The actual uprising was nothing more than a killing spree, depressingly squalid and cruel, and there really is no message in Turner's confession. There was no plan; no

hope of success.

My interest in the original jailhouse interview was piqued by a reference to the original book being banned in southern states. I haven't been able to find contemporary reports of the book's banning, only modern references here and there, but it's not hard to figure out what was going on. It is known that after Turner's uprising, several states passed laws making it illegal to teach slaves to read and write. Although Turner's failed revolt ended hopes of abolition in the South, it spurred abolition movements in the North and helped polarize the nation, a split that eventually resulted in the Civil War. In this context, it is easy to see why authorities in the South would want to suppress "The Confessions of Nat Turner." No doubt, as always, the banning of the book made it a runaway success, padding the lawyer Thomas R. Gray's pockets.

Steven says

This seems much more the product of Thomas R. Gray than Nat Turner. I noticed the odd phrase, "work of death" appear several times through the document. It appeared once in Gray's introduction, and a few more times attributed to Turner's confession, and again at the end by Gray. Gray, who was supposedly Turner's lawyer was never very sympathetic toward Turner. Another odd phrase attributed to Nat Turner was this, "we entered, and murdered Mrs. Reese in her bed, while sleeping; her son awoke, but it was only to sleep the sleep of death, he had only time to say who is that, and he was no more." - that whole bit seems like a really baroque way for anyone to confess a murder. It was also odd that Turner never had anything bad to say about his slave masters. This confession was actually complimentary toward them. His supposed motivation for killing them was religiously based. He had seen signs of the apocalypse all over the plantation. Among the signs were symbols in blood droplets all over tree leaves. I recognized what those probably were because I grew up around Virginia too, and I think they were leaf galls. Leaf galls are bright red droplet sized bumps on trees that almost look like blood, and they're caused by insects. This still has value as a historical document, but I don't think it would be right to really attribute the words to Nat Turner.
