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Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents.* Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xii + 148 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-11207-3; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-16051-7.

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Nat Turner Reader

The Bedford Series on History and Culture, under the guidance of Advisory Editors Natalie Zemon Davis and Ernest R. May, is based upon the premise that students can study the past as historians do. Each volume in the series (*Nat Turner* is the fifth.) contains an important document or group of documents. Joining the document is some element of historical narrative–an introduction or a biographical essay–that gives readers an analysis of primary source material and places that material in historical context. Each volume in the Bedford Series is short enough and inexpensive enough (in the opinion of the Advisory Editors) to be a reasonable one-week assignment in a college history course.

In the preface to the reader, Kenneth S. Greenberg acknowledges that compared to slave rebellions in Latin America and the Caribbean the Nat Turner Rebellion was quite small. Sixty to eighty active slave rebels killed sixty or fewer white victims in August 1831. However, Greenberg argues that the Nat Turner Rebellion is a vitally important event in our history, for the insight it provides about slavery, the nature of antebellum society, and African- American traditions about resistance to slavery is significant. To understand the historical significance of the Nat Turner Rebellion, Greenberg poses several questions for readers:

(1) Who was Nat Turner? (2) What were his thoughts and motives? (3) Was he part of the African-American tradition of slave resistance or was he unique? (4) What led to the insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia? (5) How did masters and political leaders react to the rebellion? (6) What do these reactions reveal about the ruling group's attitudes toward slavery and slaves?- (7) How did African-Americans react to the rebellion? (8) What were the ultimate results of the revolt?

These are excellent focus questions for students, for working through primary sources is never an easy task for undergraduates.

A teacher adopting this documentary reader could serve students well by creating a pre-assignment handout for students that contains Greenberg's eight focus questions. Students seldom, if ever, read an author's prefatory remarks and these focus questions would help students or other readers in understanding the historical significance of the Nat Turner Rebellion.

Greenberg's introduction (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*: Text and Context) contains the following:

(1) "Nat Turner: The Man and the Rebellion"

(2) "The Setting"–including maps of Southampton County, Virginia and the path of the Nat Turner Rebellion

(3) "The Text" (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*)

(4) "Slave Rebellions and Resistance"

(5) "The Aftermath of the Rebellion"

(6) "The Virginia Debate Over Emancipation"

(7) "Retelling the Story" (with emphasis on the controversy surrounding William Styron's historical novel)

Greenberg supplies 74 endnotes for this introductory essay. The most appealing aspect of Greenberg's concluding segment on the recent historiography of the Nat Turner Rebellion is his observation that this event has been relatively unexplored since 1975 (Stephen B. Oates' biography of Nat Turner). Greenberg concludes, "We are ready for a new retelling of the Nat Turner story. Perhaps some reader of this volume will begin the project." This is an excellent suggestion for those teachers who also guide the work of graduate students.

The Confessions of Nat Turner is a deposition taken by a white attorney and slave owner named Thomas R. Gray. Over a period of three days, November 1-3, 1831, Gray transcribed Turner's words along with his own notes and queries and then cross-examined Turner to supply missing information and reconcile inconsistencies in the ac-

count. This reader provides the deposition in full with original spelling throughout. This document is a rich source of unprecedented information about slavery and slave resistance. Nothing else like it exists in the literature of slave rebellions.

In addition, Greenberg provides fourteen documents to illuminate or clarify the historical context of the rebellion and its aftermath. The first, a Richmond newspaper account, is one of the earliest published reports of the rebellion. The second, written by a reporter on the scene, describes the carnage of the revolt. A third newspaper report provides more details about the incident confirmed later in Nat Turner's deposition. A fourth document is an editorial written by William Lloyd Garrison in *The Liberator* after the revolt. Garrison denies the proslavery argument that his publication inflamed Nat Turner. Instead, Garrison blames the hypocrisy of slave owners who brutalize slaves while simultaneously proclaiming a love of liberty. The fifth document is another reportorial account of the revolt in Southampton County. The sixth is a newspaper account of the trials of several slave rebels. The seventh is an anonymous letter to the editor of a Richmond newspaper that provides one of the most thorough accounts of the insurrection written before *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

The document collection continues with the eighth narrative, by a resident of Southampton County, and recounts the capture of Nat Turner. The ninth document is a contemporary account of Nat Turner's death. The tenth document is an excerpt collection from twelve trial records of the slave rebels who participated in the revolt. The eleventh document is Nat Turner's trial record. Judicial processes were swift in this case: authorities apprehended Turner on October 3, completed a one- day trial on November 5, and hanged Turner on November 11, 1831. The twelfth document is an excerpt from the diary of Virginia Governor John Floyd during the Nat Turner insurrection. The thirteenth document is a letter from Virginia Governor Floyd to South Carolina Governor James Hamilton, Jr. in which the Virginian advocates gradual emancipation to prevent future rebellions. Finally, the fourteenth document is an essay by Thomas R. Dew, "Abolition of Negro Slavery." Dew's analysis of the Virginia's legislature's debate over emancipation in the aftermath of the Nat Turner revolt became the linchpin of antebellum proslavery ideology. This collection of fourteen documents is a rich and varied mosaic of antebellum slavery and its ideology.

In a helpful appendix, Greenberg supplies a detailed chronology beginning with the earliest slave rebellion in New York in 1712 through Nat Turner's birth on October 2,1800. The chronology provides special emphasis for 1831, and Greenberg continues to highlight the major events relevant for slavery in the United States until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Greenberg also supplies readers with twenty-two questions for consideration that range from "1. Describe Nat Turner's family and the nature of his childhood. Characterize his personality and core values." to "22. Why should Americans of the twentieth century be interested in studying the Nat Turner Rebellion?" Teachers might use these questions as a pool of questions from which three or four could be chosen at random for an examination over this reading.

The crown jewel of Greenberg's appendices is a selected bibliography providing a thorough list of the monographs dealing with the Nat Turner Rebellion, the Virginia Aftermath of the Nat Turner Rebellion, and African-American Religion, Rebellion, and Resistance. In addition, Greenberg also includes the salient articles in scholarly journals under the same rubrics. He concludes the appended resources with a detailed index.

The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents is an excellent collection of readings about this historical event. This reader would be most appropriate for courses with emphasis on antebellum slavery and abolitionism. It is a fine addition to the Bedford Series in History and Culture. And it is timely. At the conclusion of his introductory essay, Greenberg recalls that a National Public Radio program in November 1994 about William Styron's 1967 novel (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*) duplicated much of the passion and heat of the debate over that book in 1967-1968. As Greenberg notes, the same racial divisions that split the nation in the 1960s continue to divide it in the 1990s. Teachers who want their students to address the problem of the color line in the antebellum era (and our own time), will find this book helpful in their quest.

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