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Book Review: Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County bu David F. Allmendinger Jr.

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David F. Allmendinger Jr., *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp. xi + 401. \$49.95 cloth (ISBN 9781421414799); \$49.95 ebook (ISBN 9781421414805). doi:10.1017/S0738248015000334

The secondary historical literature on the Turner Rebellion has long struck me as curiously unsatisfying. Curiously, because it was one of the very few successful (in that it actually happened) slave uprisings in American history—the bloodiest of all of them if measured in the deaths of slaveholders and their family members—occurring on the cusp of (indeed helping to precipitate) the South’s great reversal on the subject of slaveholding, from regrettable “evil” to positive good. And at its center is one of the most fascinating documents produced in the nineteenth century United States, Thomas Ruffin Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

Historians of the Rebellion have always had to contend with an apparently thin archive. Beyond *The Confessions* itself, source material has seemed scarce indeed: some correspondence, both official and personal, newspaper reports, and an abbreviated trial record. Much of this material was collected by Henry Irving Tragle and published more than 40 years ago as *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (1971). Tragle’s 500 pages were enough to give the lie to William Styron’s silly quip that that “any C + history student” could learn all there was to know about Nat Turner in a few days. Still, even experienced historians, Eugene Genovese for example, were satisfied that the slim available pickings supplied all the answers worth knowing. Nat Turner “was a hate-driven madman who had no idea of where he was leading his men or what they would do when they got there.” Apparently convinced that when it came to the Turner “Rebellion” there was no “there” there, Genovese preferred to dwell upon those (Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey) who better conformed to his conception of how the leader of a slave rebellion should behave. Nor was he alone. Arna Bontemps, author of *Black Thunder*, a 1936 novel about Gabriel’s rebellion, says that he had first considered writing about Turner, but—a reference to Gray’s *Confessions*—that he had been put off by Turner’s “‘visions’ and ‘dreams,’” his “trance-like mumbo-jumbo.”

So it was with considerable anticipation that I turned to David F. Allmendinger’s *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County*, and its promise of untapped sources. Having published a comprehensively researched essay on “The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*” in 2003, Allmendinger, it seems, worked on Turner’s Rebellion for upwards of 15 years (so much for Styron). The results carry all the considerable weight that careful, painstaking archival research should carry. Beginning, in effect, where Tragle left off, Allmendinger has plunged deep into a half century of Southampton County public records—“wills, deeds, inventories, court minutes, chancery records, marriage registers, free black registers, processioners’

returns, tax lists, [and] poll books” (302)—to reconstitute the social and familial world of the locale (principally St. Luke’s Parish) in which Turner’s Rebellion took form and place. He has, in the most comprehensive sense, created a material context for Turner’s Rebellion, a context that did not previously exist. He has enormously expanded the Turner Rebellion’s archive.

Legal historians will find Allmendinger’s research design very familiar, if not entirely to their taste, because it is very traditional social history. The legal archive is utterly central to the inquiry, but it is not used to ask (or answer) any legal-historical questions. Allmendinger tracks and rounds out the individual personalities of “the court house circle”—a valuable exercise—but it is fair to say that he has little interest in any specifically legal issue arising from the Turner Rebellion. Daniel Fabricant’s critique of criminal procedure in the Southampton County Court, for example, makes no appearance here. In Allmendinger’s own description, his approach is that of the antiquary, pondering “a single incident in a particular place,” consumed by “identifying individuals and reconstructing their lives” through “everyday fact-finding and plain detective work” (301, 305).

Allmendinger’s goal is “to limit speculation and avoid fiction” (305). Here is both the book’s strength and, I think, its shortcoming. First, the strength is that Allmendinger’s longitudinal archival research enables him to situate Nat Turner amid a multigenerational network of intermarried and allied slaveholding families bent on accumulating wealth in land and slaves. He situates Turner’s closest confederates within the same network, thereby demonstrating precisely how Turner and his confederates were able to form *their own* network. He underscores slaves’ terrible vulnerabilities as assets: collateral in transactions and divisible property in estate settlements. Thus, from material circumstance, he derives both organization and motive for the Rebellion. Allmendinger also offers a detailed explanation for the actual course taken by the Rebellion that utterly controverts Genovese’s contemptuous dismissal of its apparent aimlessness. He explains the Rebellion’s chorography and patterns of recruitment. He pinpoints and accounts for the fall of virtually everybody, black and white, over the course of its 48 hours. He carefully and convincingly refutes the claim—widely believed at the time and embroidered later—of widespread white retaliation against the local African American population.

As to shortcomings, I think these are of two varieties. First, in the strength of the method also lie its limitations. Allmendinger is so committed to relentless specificity in archival research that substantial sections of the book are little more than narrative reproductions of estate inventories. Second, and more important, his method assumes that intellection (motive, belief, understanding), and hence the meaning of behavior, can be read from material context. When it comes to explanation of the Rebellion, that is, Allmendinger relies on the logic of behavioral science. The explanations are various: it was a

revolution against slavery, it was revenge against particular slaveholders, it was a form of terrorism against the white population. All, of course, are plausible. But can it be assumed that the intellection of African American slaves in general, and Nat Turner in particular, can be read from their behavior, and their behavior from context? Although he desires “to limit speculation and avoid fiction” Allmendinger here finds himself no different from William Styron, for whom the only way to make Turner and his rebellion comprehensible was to emphasize motives “springing from social and behavioral roots.”

We are all in David Allmendinger’s debt for the labor of research that has given *The Rising in Southampton County* its absent material context. The question that remains is whether readers can be as confident as he is that they now also know precisely what that rising *was*. Here we must allow ourselves permission to resort not to speculation, but to historical interpretation and imagination.

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John W. Compton, *The Evangelical Origins of the Living Constitution*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. Pp. 261. \$45.00 (ISBN 9780674726796).

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Political scientist John W. Compton provides a new way of understanding the New Deal revolution in American constitutionalism and the origins of the vision of a living United States Constitution. Evangelical Protestants are to blame. Compton turns away from the standard examination of the United States Supreme Court’s adjudication of progressive economic regulation, and instead explores courts’ reception of the legislative results of nineteenth century moral crusades. Early judicial sanction of alcohol and lottery prohibitions, he reveals, helped open the door for the Court’s broader abandonment in the 1930s of the traditional protections of property rights and the customary boundaries of federalism. Grounded in an examination of state and federal appellate cases as well as legal commentary and reform literature, this insightful study will interest scholars of American courts and constitutionalism.

Compton covers nearly 150 years of history in five chapters. In the first, Compton establishes his view of the early constitutional order and evangelicals’ subsequent challenge. To him, protecting vested property rights and bolstering the commercial republic’s economic development were the bedrock constitutional values. Reform efforts inspired by the Second Great Awakening, however, sought to destroy ostensibly immoral forms of property. Fruitfully looking beyond the usual focus—slave property—Compton examines lottery