

A New and Challenging History of Nat Turner and His Rebellion

Author : Angela Fernandez

Date : April 2, 2021

Christopher Tomlins, [In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History](#) (2020).

Christopher Tomlins's new book, *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Spectacular History*, is a *tour de force*. It retells the history of Nat Turner's famous rebellion with a focus on Turner's religious motivations. The book begins by explaining the shortcomings of previous accounts of Turner, attempting to reconstruct what might have motivated Turner to decide in August 1831 to lead a group of fellow slaves on a campaign in Southampton, Virginia, "to rise up and kill all the white people." Tomlins's book shows how historical speculation and conjecture can be done in a way that is nonetheless solidly grounded in biblical, philosophical, anthropological, and historical context. The book is about Turner, yes, but insofar as it demonstrates the approach—call it "grounded speculation"—it is also a reflection on history itself and what to do as a historian when the historical event you are interested in is simultaneously under-documented and over-interpreted.

Tomlins begins by outlining the problems with two widely-relied upon accounts of the Turner Rebellion, both titled *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which co-opted Turner in the service of other agendas. First, there was the contemporary account given by white county lawyer Thomas Ruffin Gray to whom Turner confessed while in prison awaiting trial. Gray produced a very complicated text about which Tomlins writes, "[it] is undoubtedly evidentiary, but evidence of what?" (P. 31.) What follows is a very nuanced reading of the work and what can and cannot be inferred from it.

Secondly, Tomlins critiques the 1967 best-selling book written by white novelist William Styron. Styron purported to be providing a historical "meditation" on the event. However, he was not a historian. Tomlins persuasively argues that Styron was, in reality, using Turner to make sense of the race riots of the 1960's and to fulfil Styron's own self-involved fantasy of what he thought of as every Southerner's duty to come to know "the negro." Both men treated Turner's "enthusiasm as insanity." (P. 11.) And both were profiting by turning Turner's story into their property. (P. x.)

Tomlins, by contrast, embarks on a "work of recovery and recognition" (P. x) to understand Turner "on *his* terms." (P. 22, emphasis in the original.) Specifically, Tomlins analyzes how Turner saw himself as commanded by God to take up, as reluctantly as Abraham did the command to kill his own son, God's "work of death." What follows is simultaneously chilling and immensely instructive. Tomlins weaves, often through long and learned footnotes, his own reflections on philosophical topics such as Walter Benjamin's concept of "divine violence," central to Tomlins's conjectures about Turner. (See Pp. 279-80, note 3.)

Tomlins wants most to emphasize the profound religious faith likely underlying Turner's actions. He argues that faith has been washed out by those who have made but a feeble attempt to understand Turner, Grey who was "irreligious" (P. 86) and Styron who was not interested in religion. The Prologue starts with a of the cover of Styron's novel (P.1), Chapter 1 with a reproduction of the title page of Gray's work, and Chapter 2 with a photograph of Turner's bible. (P. 50.) Tomlins starts the religious reconstruction with the Gospel of Luke because Turner lived all his life in St. Luke's parish in Southampton County (P. 52), and because of the appropriateness of some of the teachings in this Gospel relating to "reversal" (P. 55) and how "the first [the white slave-owning Virginian] should be last and the last [the slave] should be first." (P. 61.) As Tomlins describes, Turner "has been widely identified as a lay preacher [...] was highly intelligent (that is generally accepted), and he was highly literate [...] like Christ he too was thirty years old when [as he put it] the time came to 'arise and prepare myself.'" (P. 77.)

In addition to a range of other biblical texts, Tomlins also connects Turner's revolutionary eschatology and his

Virginian Methodism to Jonathan Edwards, arguing that Turner likely saw himself as comparable to David in David and Goliath. (P. 79.) Chapter 3 takes up the notion of “divine violence” that Turner saw as demanding his action as a kind of Kierkegaardian “Knight of Faith” with no choice but to obey God’s command whatever ethics and the law said, and however horrifying the consequences. Chapter 4 describes the killings, what Turner called his “work of death,” deliberate and methodical. What was its logic? Tomlins writes that, according to Locke, “killing those who would maintain one in relations of dependence is a means to obtain a property in oneself.” (P. 96.) Perhaps that was the kind of politics that inspired others to follow Turner; yet for Turner, Tomlins emphasizes, it was first and foremost a matter of faith.

Where the earlier chapters deal with the religious reconstruction of what might have been Turner’s mindset and the event itself, the last two chapters of the book, Chapters 5 and 6, deal with the fall out or ripple effects of the rebellion in a fragile and fractious Virginia. The state was split between slave owners in the East and a West with more development-oriented interests. Here we are told about how Turner, “the self-possessed rebel” (P. 141), haunted the state’s Constitutional Convention in 1829-30, controversies over using (discounted) slave labor on public work projects, and debates about emancipation in 1831-32. The rebellion helped support pro-emancipation on the grounds of safety and security, the danger that “proximity” between blacks and whites raised, and the idea, however briefly entertained, from the Western part of the State that “the right of private property must yield to the right of society to be secure.” (P. 181.) The pro-property East, concerned about the loss of their capital in future slaves that would be born and manumitted once they reached the age of majority, pushed back against the idea that this “increase” was not naturally (and legally) theirs. To white Virginians, Turner had to be presented to the public as an irrational and insane aberration, the perpetrator of a wild and random massacre that made no sense and was unlikely to repeat itself. “[W]ild and intemperate proposals for abolition and emancipation ... ‘subversive of the rights of property’” were neither necessary nor welcome. (P. 188.)

This work is very unlike Tomlins’s earlier books given the way that it focuses on a specific event. It is challenging reading for a number of reasons. First, there are the descriptions of the killings in Chapter 4. They put me in the mindset of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, another best-selling “true crime” novel from the 1960’s, gripping yet awful in their details. Tomlins presents the killings in a very matter-of-fact and non-sensationalist way that gets the point across but nonetheless left me at least feeling disturbed.

Second, trying to climb inside spiritual and supernatural faith when you do not share it is not an easy thing to do and many readers will likely find themselves in this position. It is challenging for us (just as it was for Gray and Styron) not to secularize such an event. Yet in Turner’s case, Tomlins is asking us to refrain from turning Turner into “a conscript of modernity,” making him into something sensible to us and inappropriately substituting a flat figure for a three dimensional person who was motivated by spiritual and supernatural faith. (P. 280, note 3.)

Thirdly, looking for the logic in “divine violence” or “righteous violence” runs up against abhorrence of violence and the urge to condemn it in any form. Yet it is not our job as historians to try and stand in the same shoes as the Southampton County Court to condemn Turner’s acts (or to try to explain and try to excuse them). The job of the historian is to try to read and understand (especially difficult) events on their own terms and, as Tomlins elegantly puts it at the end of the book, “be ready to read what was never written.” (P. 218.) That imaginative leap is required when it comes to the thinly documented, e.g. the person at the center of the Turner Rebellion. It is just those topics that most deserve our attention, as they will often involve incidents, events, or people that are easy to misunderstand and manipulate into something quite different from who and what they were.

Cite as: Angela Fernandez, *A New and Challenging History of Nat Turner and His Rebellion*, JOTWELL (April 2, 2021) (reviewing Christopher Tomlins, *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History* (2020)), <https://legalhist.jotwell.com/a-new-and-challenging-history-of-nat-turner-and-his-rebellion/>.