



The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory

Scot French

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How did the bloodiest slave uprising in American history--once thought to have involved hundreds of conspirators, black and white, free and enslaved--come to be known simply as "Nat Turner's Rebellion"? And why does the enigmatic figure of the rebellious slave resonate so powerfully across American history? In this richly detailed study spanning the eras of slavery, Jim Crow, and civil rights, Scot French places the contested history and enduring memory of Nat Turner's Rebellion within the broader context of the black freedom struggle. French builds his narrative around close readings of historical texts, both famous and obscure, from early American prophecies of slave rebellion to William Styron's 1967 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about Turner. He devotes considerable attention to the interplay between quasi-official narratives, such as "The Confessions of Nat Turner" by Thomas R. Gray, and less authoritative sources, such as rumor and oral tradition. Whereas most historians accept "The Confessions" as gospel, French presents several compelling counternarratives that point to a wider conspiracy. A groundbreaking work of American history, analogous to Merrill D. Peterson's *Abraham Lincoln in American Memory* and Nell Painter's *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol, The Rebellious Slave* will alter our views of both slavery and its complex, ever-changing legacy.

"Nat Turner was neither the first nor the last American slave to rise in arms against his oppressors," French writes. "Yet he stands alone in American culture as the epitome of the rebellious slave, a black man whose words and deeds challenged the white slaveholding South and awakened a slumbering nation. A maker of history in his own day, Turner has been made to serve the most pressing needs of every generation since. In remembering Nat Turner, Americans must boldly confront--or deftly evade, at their peril--the intertwined legacies of slavery and racism in a nation founded on revolutionary ideals of freedom and equality."

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