

Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires Of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*, New York, NY: Harper

Perennial, 1990 (1975). 181pages. ISBN 0-06-091670-2

In *Fires Of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*, noted Civil War Historian Stephen B. Oates, author of *With Malice Towards None: A life Of Abraham Lincoln*, *The Approaching Fury: [1820-1861](#)* and *Let The Trumpet Sound: A life Of Martin Luther King Jr.* tells the story of the Southampton County, Virginia slave revolt which occurred in August of 1831 and which is known in American History as Nat Turner's Rebellion. Oates believes that Nat Turner's bloody rebellion and the savage reprisals that followed shattered beyond repair the myth of the benign master and contented slave and intensified the forces of change that would lead to bloodbath of the Civil War. " I hoped to convey how the insurrection shocked the slave South to it's foundations, exacerbated sectional tensions and pointed the way to the Civil War thirty years later." (page ix) " He is the most famous slave insurgent in American history, the victim of a violent system who struck back with retributive violence. His rebellion illustrates a profound truth. " Nat Turner reminds us that oppression is a kind of violence which pays in coins of its own minting and that individuals and systems always reap what they sow." (page ix) This focus on the resulting reaction to Turners rebellion by the slaveholding South forms a large section of the history and would seem to be the major theme of the book.

The first part of the book begins with Oates thorough biography of both Southampton County Virginia in the early 1800's and of Nat Turner's life during that time entitled *This Infernal Spirit of Slavery*. " When I wrote this biography of Nat, I tried to tell his story with empathy and accuracy. I wanted to transport readers back to Nat's time so that they might suffer with him and see the world of slavery and the Old South through his eyes." (page ix) The Southampton County that Nat was born in and portrayed in *The Fires Of Jubilee* was a place where the majority of slave owners were small or medium sized farmers who owned small amounts of slaves. " By Southern white standards, enlightened benevolence did exist in Southampton County – and it existed in the rest of the state as well. Virginians liked to boast that slavery was not so harsh in the Old Dominion as it was on the brutal cotton plantations in the Deep South." (page 3) Oates states that " Virginians convinced themselves that all was sweetness and sunshine in their master-slave relations and that in Southampton County whites too were pretty lax toward their slaves allowing them to gather for religious purposes and to visit other farms to see friends and relations. (page 3) According to Oates this was the environment that Nat Turner was born into on October 2,1800. Nat was recognized as someone special from as early as five years of age often astounding his playmates and adults by telling them in detail about events that happened before he was born. This ability was ascribed to the power of the Almighty working through young Nat. Around the same time Nat learned to read and his fame grew so that both Black and White people were aware of his special status, his master even encouraged him to read and took Nat to prayer meetings with him. Nat's family and friends all saw him as a person who possessed special gifts and that he was in some way destined for great things. Unfortunately Nat's life suffered a series of shocks including the escape and disappearance of his father, and the death of his master Benjamin Turner which upset Nat's special status, a status which he would never again attain with any of his future

owners, in fact by the time he was in his teens Nat became nothing more than an ordinary field hand. (page 15) Because of his intelligence and change in status Nat grew into a resentful yet deeply religious young man who was seen almost as a prophet among the other slaves of the area. Nat zealously cultivated his image as a prophet, aloof, austere, and mystical, he avoided mixing in society, drinking alcohol and instead he devoted himself to fasting and prayer. (page 27)

In part two of *The Fires Of Jubilee* entitled *Go Sound The Jubilee*, Oates describes the vivid and violent dreams and visions that Nat began to have around the age of twenty three, and which would increasingly consume him. “ Nat began having bloody, apocalyptic visions in the woods and fields southwest of Jerusalem Virginia. I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, Nat cried out, and the sun was darkened – the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams.” (page 36

He began to preach to the slave church and spread the true gospel among his people. Nat recounted his visions in dramatic detail, telling his congregation about the warring angels in the sky. (page 37) Nat began to wait for a sign in the heavens to begin his great work which the Holy Spirit had finally revealed to him and to which Nat revealed to only a few close followers that “ I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons.” (page 41) When he had crushed his white enemies and defeated the Serpent then Nat Turner would bring on the years of Jubilee when those who had been first – the white masters – would become subservient to the blacks who had been last. (page 41) On Saturday August 13, 1831 a black spot appeared on the sun and Nat took this unusual occurrence as the final sign from God to commence the killing of all white people (women and children included) in the area.

Part three of *Fires Of Jubilee* is titled *Judgement Day* and it is in this section of the book that Oates recounts the bloody, ghastly and the almost unbelievable violence of Nat's rebellion. The wealth of first hand accounts and confessions lends an immediacy to this section of the book and it is indeed extremely difficult reading. After detailing the murders of men, women and children Oates immediately

begins his task of detailing the major theme of the book which is the white reaction to the Rebellion and the effects it would have on the South both white and black. This section deals with the reaction of the white community in Southampton County and throughout the South immediately following the Rebellion, the last section of the book details the longterm reactions and Nat's legacy. *Judgement Day* ends with Nat making his famous *Confessions* and the controversy surrounding them. Thomas Gray, a Jerusalem lawyer wrote down Nat's *Confessions* and historians still debate their authenticity. Are the *Confessions* Nat's own thinking and words or are they filtered through Grays eyes and sensibilities?

Part four of the book titled *Legacy* is really the section where Oates theme of reaction to and legacy of Nat's Rebellion comes to fruition. It is here that the historian in Oates comes to the fore. The consequences are far reaching and become entrenched in Southern society all the way up to the Civil War. Southern leaders immediately place the blame of the slave insurrection on the burgeoning Abolitionist movement in the North, especially William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. The insurrection shook the " Old Dominion" to it's core and even prompted the Virginia legislature to discuss emancipation for slaves in Virginia. The debate went on for months throughout the state finally ending with it's rejection around February of 1832. The reaction of the rest of the South was to clamp down on slaves enforcing strict new slave codes which all but eliminated slave schools, slave religious meetings and slave preachers. (page140) " The fear of another slave rebellion haunted whites throughout the rest of the antebellum period, and his name became for them a symbol of black terror and violent retribution." (page145)

In the foreword to the Perennial Library Edition, Oates stated that " through the technique of dramatic narration, I wanted to transport readers back to Nat's time so that they might suffer with him and see the world of slavery and the Old South through his eyes. That way they might gain melancholy insight into what it was like to be a slave." (page ix) In *The Fires Of Jubilee*, Oates succeeds in doing a good job of accomplishing the task he set out for himself and his readers. His history not only manages to detail the events inside and outside Southampton County but also manages to paint a realistic and moving picture of daily life in antebellum Virginia. In his epilogue Oates describes the visit he and his wife made to Southampton County back in 1973, which he says " was essential in providing him a feel for " Nat Turner Country" giving him a sense of the land, forests, smells and the people both black and white, - that I could not otherwise have acquired." (page 147) Oates does not try to make judgements about the revolt, which some see as a killing spree and others see as a fight for liberation, instead providing a narrative which displays the horror and brutality of both the rebels' violence and white reprisals, and leaving the moral reckoning with the reader. *The Fires Of Jubilee* is great blend of historical narrative that remains highly readable and popular as well as being scholarly and historically sound.

Using *The Fires Of Jubilee* as a supplemental reading in a U.S. I history class.

- ▲ Students will be able to explain what took place during Turner's revolt, and why Turner led the revolt

Students will explain the short term consequences of Nat Turners revolt

Students will explain the long term consequences of Nat Turners revolt

The Instructor will divide the class into 5 groups with each group receiving a reading selection from the book, each reading represents a particular section of Oates book. Students will then answer a specific question for their section followed by a general question that all groups must answer.

Section 1 *This Infernal Spirit Of Slavery*

Question: What circumstances in Nat Turner's life led him to start his rebellion?

Section 2 *Go Sound The Jubilee*

Question: What was the purpose of the Revolt?

Section 3 *Judgement Day*

Question: What occurred during the rebellion?

Section 4 *Legacy*

Question: What were the short and long term consequences of the rebellion?

Section 5 *Epilogue*

Question: What living legacies were present in Southampton Co. in 1973? What living legacies are present today?

Question for All Groups:

Try to work for a group consensus to the following question; keeping in mind his background, his environment, and the historical times in general, how justified do you feel Nat Turner was in his actions?

Students will hand in one written paper per group with all group members names on it.

