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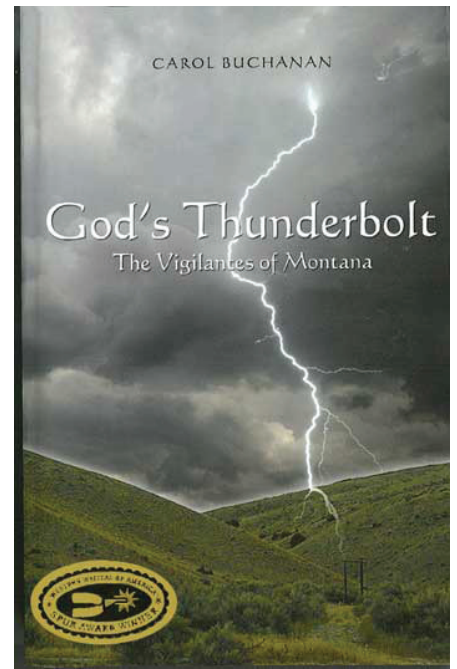
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Book Notes by Brett Alan Sanders

<http://www.new-works.org/sanders.html>

“God’s Thunderbolt: The Vigilantes of Montana” *Carol Buchanan*

God’s Thunderbolt: The Vigilantes of Montana,
by Carol Buchanan, 2008, www.booksurge.com,
410 pages. Winner of 2009 Spur Award for First Novel.



“God’s Thunderbolt: the Vigilantes of Montana”

You might recognize Carol Buchanan as the author of “Comes a Stranger,” a fictionalized account of a bit of family folklore, which appeared in the Summer 2008 edition of NWR. That story recounted, from the fictional mother’s perspective, Buchanan’s father’s memory of a real encounter with the Sundance Kid. That portrait of a young widowed frontier mother, surprised by simultaneous feelings of fear and a sympathetic attraction to the mysterious visitor against whom her boy was prepared to defend her, is still with me as I write this note. The psychological precision of its characterization moved me as much as the narrative intrigued.

God’s Thunderbolt, Buchanan’s award-winning first novel about Montana’s Vigilante era (1863-1864), is a finely crafted and developed literary work that richly fulfills the promise of that captivating story. More than a cookie-cutter genre Western, this book is at once a rejuvenation of the literary Western’s time-honored conventions (as noted in a blurb by Marshall Cook, author of the Monona Quinn mystery series from Bleak House books) and a deeply reflective and philosophical meditation on the historical forces at play in our entire nation – forces abroad not only at that time of Civil War but in our own day as well, with an African American newly installed in the White House and the most strident of his opponents talking up (however disingenuously!) the merits of secession.

The book’s lengthy first part, called “Justice for Nick,” opens with the gruesome discovery of a corpse. Only later, by the chance recognition of a loaned pocket knife, is the victim identified as one Nick Tballt, son of a Dutch immigrant. Part one centers on the pursuit, common-law trial, and hanging of a central figure in that murder of a relative innocent, while part two, “Vigilantes Rise,” follows the clandestine searching out and cleansing of a vast criminal conspiracy of robbery and violence that reached to the highest levels of local governance and had been terrorizing the vicinity for some time. Intertwined with all that is the slow-developing and sweet romance of two principals, whose eventual happiness is prefigured in a denouement that is at once haunted and hopeful.

The opening passage sets up the book’s central drama with sharp, unflinching prose from which the reader can scarcely turn away without seeing where it goes:

“A breeze from high country snowfields flowed along the edges of winter into the valley of the Stinking Water, swept aside the horses’ tails and ruffled their manes, and carried away the sickening sweet smell of the frozen corpse riding in William Palmer’s wagon bed. ‘Those heartless bloody bastards,’ Palmer grumbled to the team. Ears flicked back, then forward. ‘Wouldn’t even help load this poor sod, whoever he is, into the wagon, would they? Didn’t bloody care, did they?’ ‘Men get killed every day in Virginia City,’ they said, “and nobody minds that, so why should we bother about this one?” Heartless bastards, that’s what they are, this poor bugger lying almost in their back yard for days. Had to manhandle him into the wagon myself, didn’t I? A nice job that was, I don’t think. Poor bastard. I need a drink.’ At Laurin’s, he watered the team, drank a whiskey at the bar, and didn’t blame Laurin none when he recoiled, gagging. ‘Le pauvre batard,’ which Palmer took to mean, the poor bastard. Seven miles on, where Ramshorn Creek emptied into the Stinking Water, he had another whiskey at Dempsey’s to take the smell of the corpse out of his throat. Bob Dempsey, a decent enough chap for an Irishman, reacted the same as Laurin. “The poor fella. They let him lay?” At Pete Daly’s, on Alder Creek, the stage driver was changing horses while the passengers stretched their legs, and lost their appetite for lunch. ‘Poor bastard. Who would do such a thing? They let him lie there?’”

It goes on like that for a couple more paragraphs before diverting our attention to the perspective of the female principal, Martha McDowell, who witnesses the wagon pulling into Virginia City and sees the black freedman who approaches it pull back and disappear into an alley. “Over the retching sounds, Miz Hudson said, ‘Takes something mighty dreadful to upset a former slave.’” To that, the ex-slave’s young counterpart, named Tabby, said, “Albert has a tender heart,” and then Martha adds, “Oh, Lord,” because it is “all she could think of, being struck as she was with two new ideas at once, that the wagon had something horrible in it, and a Negro, big and black as Albert, could have a soft heart.”

From that scene we are diverted once more, the suspense building to crescendo levels as we smell the “old rotten meat” stench of one man’s buffalo coat and witness – while “the hurdy-gurdy dancers polka’d, their skirts flaring like red, yellow, and blue poppies, to a fiddle’s scratching, as out of tune as fingernails on a blackboard” – the playing out of a card game that nearly ends in violence for the male principal, his right to quit with winnings intact defended by the saloon keeper’s shotgun. From there Daniel Stark walks out to the waiting corpse and is drawn into the drama that will make him much hated by the ruffians who have come to rule in that gold miners’ town. The “pauvre batard” of the opening segment then laid to rest, it is Martha McDowell who sets what follows in motion with a simple challenge to the men there gathered: “You-all want the Lord to smite the evildoers, it appears to me like ya’ll are going to have to be God’s thunderbolt.”

No aspect of the novel is more intriguing than the light it casts on, not Montana or Western history alone, but on our broader national history of Civil War, on the struggle over slavery’s yet-to-be-determined fate: its extension into Western territories and future states, or its extermination at the root. Buchanan’s savvy treatment of the subject brings me back to Fred Kaplan’s *Lincoln*, which by some coincidence I have also been recently perusing.

I am especially drawn back to Kaplan’s discussion of Stephen Douglas’s efforts to “to recast the issue of slavery in the territories” by invalidating a key provision of the Missouri Compromise of 1850:

“The Compromise,” Kaplan writes, “had recommitted the country to excluding slavery from all states north of an irregular line drawn east to west, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Nebraska was north of that line. So, too, was Kansas, whose statehood aspirations were soon included in an amended bill, dubbed

the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Previously, the Compromise's north-south balance had been maintained by coupling the admission of a slave state and a free state. Douglas believed he had a better idea, which he called 'popular sovereignty.' Settlers would be permitted to bring slaves with them to any territory in the country, which, he argued, the Constitution gave them the right to do. At the time of admission to statehood, the residents would vote on whether to make slavery legal or illegal in their newly formed state."

The bill was passed by the House and Senate and signed into law by President Franklin Pierce on May 30, 1854. There can be no doubt that its provision of unfettered democracy (at least for white men) in these still only marginally civilized Western territories, where as Buchanan elaborates with considerable historical precision were not properly governed by either Union or Confederate constitution, played a significant if by no means exclusive role in nourishing the reign of lawlessness and banditry that set the stage for vigilante campaigns such as provide the grist for Buchanan's tale.

Countless factors, of course, (not least of them the gold rush that is the reason for Buchanan's frontier towns' very existence), drew the sort of ruffians and scoundrels who populate her story. To contain their overwhelmingly Confederate sentiments, Buchanan introduces (as one member of a team of three prosecutors) one Charles Bagg, an Attorney at Law and now gold miner who until recently "had the honor to serve the Glorious Cause as a Major" in the Confederate army.

In one scene, as the precariously emergent common-law court is still wrangling over who will constitute the jury, our old friend Daniel Stark realizes that neither he nor his other partner, dressed in a Union army greatcoat, is going to get through to this crowd of "mostly Southerners and Copperheads," who "wanted truth in their own speech. From one of their own." So Bagg then addresses them with both hands raised: "Listen to me, you hard luck cases.' Laughter from the crowd. 'I'm Charley Bagg, I got a claim in Junction District, and I ain't a Union man wanting to make you do anything that ain't democratic.'" He goes on then to second his co-prosecutors' claim that the defense's proposed trial format (so prejudiced in favor of the ruffians) is a sham, and then helps sell Stark's constitutional compromise that aims to satisfy everyone's sense of fairness.

In this and countless other scenes Buchanan establishes what is central to Kaplan's Lincoln: the centrality of literacy, of the ancient and too-often maligned arts of rhetoric and jurisprudence, to the ultimate survival of any community or system of governance – based in sensible republican and democratic principles and sustained by constant restraint, compromise, and civic virtue – such as Lincoln sought to preserve in the greater conflict that the Western vigilante wars mirrored.

Throughout Buchanan's novel are varied reflections on texts ranging from the Bible (from whose pages Martha – under Miz Hudson's tutelage and within a blossoming friendship with Albert and Tabby – is learning to read) to William Blake ("Tyger! tyger! burning bright / in the forests of the night") to Ralph Waldo Emerson (a bit of literary irony, for instance, before the stark desolateness of a land ravaged by a gold rush and its accompanying greed, from the great American Transcendentalist's Nature: "I please myself with the graces of the winter scenery."

In Lincoln's case I return to Kaplan's explication of some surviving fragments of what appear to be a series of three exploratory essays, the second two responding directly to Douglas's notion of popular sovereignty, in which he seems to be working out the final shape of his position on the nature of government as it pertains to the problem of slavery. We all know by now, from much revisionist and

sometimes debunking historiography, that Lincoln was more determined to preserve the Union than to end slavery, and that his racial attitudes were at best paternalistic, but none of this diminishes the generous humanity or the philosophical and rhetorical rigor behind his words' intellectual scaffolding.

In answer to popular sovereignty, in any case, Lincoln first posits that government, as Kaplan explains it, "has two necessary functions: to do for the people as a whole what they cannot individually do for themselves and to administer justice in a community in which 'the injustice of men' is an inevitable feature. ... The necessity for the larger force of government inheres in the tendency in human nature to be unjust in the furtherance of self-interest. The function of government is to ensure and promote justice." Then, in light of this tendency of men toward self-interest and injustice, he establishes a view of natural law based on every man's right to "the fruit of his labor."

"This is, in fact, 'so plain,'" Kaplan writes, flowing in and out of Lincoln's own language, "'that the most dumb and stupid slave that ever toiled for a master, does constantly know that he is wronged' and 'although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself.' And to the argument that 'some men are too ignorant, and vicious, to share in government,' that may be so; but 'by your system, you would always keep them ignorant, and vicious. We proposed,' referring to the Founding Fathers and the Declaration of Independence, 'to give all a chance; and we expected the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant, wiser; and all better, and happier together'" – a sentiment well confirmed in the writings of Thomas Jefferson.

Lincoln further probes the logical fallacies behind slavery's perpetuation by illustrating how the same logic allowing one man to enslave another might also allow that other to enslave the first:

"You say A. is white, and B. is black. It is color then," Lincoln continues; "the lighter, having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be the slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own. You do not mean color exactly? – You mean the whites are intellectually the superior of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own. But, say you, it is a question of interest; and, if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you."

This the exceptional and straight-forward rhetoric of a man who, as Kaplan makes plain, like Isocrates of democratic Athens and Cicero of republican Rome, understood language – and, in particular, written language – as the greatest invention of human civilization, and "whose character and standards in the use of language avoided the distortions and other dishonest uses of language that have done so much to undermine the credibility of national leaders."

Lincoln too, Kaplan reminds us, "is distinguished from every other president, with the exception of Jefferson, in that we can be certain that he wrote every word to which his name is attached."

Now, of course, there is also Barack Obama, whose eloquence in oratory and writing would seem to compare quite well with Lincoln's. And while in the context of the modern Presidency he cannot operate completely without the cooperation of a speech writer, it is well known that he has occasionally holed himself up for days at a time and hammered out his own speech. It is also known that the young writer he works with most closely has become well practiced at imitating the cadences and forms of speech that Obama prefers and has perfected essentially on his own. The memoir that established his literary style

– published, in this edition, along with the 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address that catapulted that book back into print, and himself to national fame – is worthy illustration of the point. And this too, I would argue, is pertinent to the issues at heart of Buchanan’s very worthy literary Western, which without making a point of it establishes a cultural stew of national and ethnic origins.

In one telling early scene, in which Miz Hudson has just offered to teach Martha McDowell to read, and her little girl also clamors for her chance to go to school, the narrator comments: “Their hankerings came from being here, among so many different people, Jews and Christians and unbelievers and blacks and whites and Indians. All sorts.” In this passage as it coheres with what precedes and follows it, as in Obama’s inaugural speech in which he also honors unbelievers and even American Muslims as part of the stew, our diversity appears more a strength than a hindrance. Contrary to what race-baiters – of that time and this – have to say about the white man’s peril: “That’s what’s at stake here, boys,” one of the murderers’ defense team argues toward the end of part one. “Our freedom. ... the freedom of every white man in the Territory.”

Aside from the growing importance of Albert and Tabby, the two ex-slaves, and the curious rivalry and almost-friendship between Nick Tballt’s Southern-sympathizing Dutch father and the Yankee Daniel Stark, I am particularly struck by that Yankee surveyor and lawyer’s constant companion Jacob Himmelfarb, a Russian Jewish immigrant of sweet temperament, hesitant English, and an essential human goodness. Early on, as Nick’s rather hot-headed father is questioning Stark’s credentials (as a Yankee and a non-Mason) to accompany the riders in search of Nick’s killers, Jacob with his fragmented eloquence quickly settles the question: “...‘I come to this country, and nothing do I have. Not a thing. Maybe a few dollars, and some clothes. This man –’ he bent his head toward Dan – ‘this man, he see me, we talk, he offer me job, show me how to be chain man, share his cabin.’ He paused, and his Adam’s apple bobbed. ‘In the Old Country is pogrom. The Cossacks our rabbi lynch. Our houses they burn. Barns. There, a gentile gives not even a crust of bread to a Jew. Dan Stark says, we are not Cossacks.’”

It is this – the eloquence of honest speech: the persuasive power of words over fisticuffs or guns; the strength of honest and searching rhetoric, whether embodied in the words of Lincoln or Obama or some anonymous and perhaps “illegal” immigrant – it is this that makes of so much diversity of biology, culture, language, and sentiment the reality its potentiality suggests. “Old arguments resurfacing that he thought were settled,” the narrator comments as the Vigilance Committee is just starting to assemble an ethical set of guiding principles. “It is the way of men, Dan thought, to talk a problem to death before proceeding to solve it.”

And this not by way of disparagement but of a necessary understanding: only within the moment’s contingency, guided by principles long established but never truly self-evident, can a way forward from the present chaos be worked out – and this only, unless into further and ever-worsening chaos, by means of an honest and spirited give-and-take of ideas.

It is by words, after all, that Lincoln proposed to reconcile North and South, and were his rhetoric met by a more honest and less distorted response from all parties, how much bloodshed might have been spared! It remains to be seen, today, to what extent our new President will manage to raise the standard of our political discourse above the cheap racial baiting and fearmongering of his extreme opposition, who either cynically or with inflamed prejudices wave the divisive and self-destructive flag of false and beleaguered patriotisms of hate.

Obama, in the length of his highly literate and remarkably candid memoir (how fortunate that he wrote it before political ambitions might have counseled against such frankness!), addresses the paradox of our competing national patriotisms with keen insight. Inevitably, a good deal of this reckoning has to do with his own mixed racial identity – the nation’s problematic history of white-black relations, for one, but also its treatment of indigenous Americans and other minorities, and likewise its mixed if often well-intentioned international footprint.

One passage, deep within a longer treatment of the “enduring puzzle” of his maternal grandparents’ acceptance of the mixed marriage of his Kansas-born white mother and black Kenyan father, strikes me as particularly comprehending of a basic aspect of our American character.

“He would always be like that, my grandfather,” Obama writes, “always searching for that new start, always running away from the familiar. By the time the family arrived in Hawaii, his character would have been fully formed, I think – the generosity and eagerness to please, the awkward mix of sophistication and provincialism, the rawness of emotion that could make him at once tactless and easily bruised. His was an American character, one typical of men of his generation, men who embraced the notion of freedom and individualism and the open road without always knowing its price, and whose enthusiasms could as easily lead to the cowardice of McCarthyism as to the heroics of World War II. Men who were both dangerous and promising precisely because of their fundamental innocence; men prone, in the end, to disappointment.”

By this point perhaps I am stretching a bit, but along with all of the grotesque bravado and violence of the most colorful of Buchanan’s frontier outlaws (the most colorful, for sure, one Boone Helm, fancied himself “the meanest son of a bitch west of the Mississippi,” his mammy a polecat and his daddy a grizzly bear, and boasted of eating his human prey), along with all of them – and even they are granted what John Gardner (in *The Art of Fiction*, 1983) called “their moment of dignity” – were a good many innocents who, however tainted by prejudice and self-interest, were firmly devoted to our most deeply planted myths of individual triumph and independence.

The truth of our American story, as Buchanan also shows, is one of inter-dependence and the survival of communities of mutually interested individuals. As Bill Moyers puts it in *Moyers on Democracy* (2008): “The lie is John Wayne: the embodiment of the rugged individual as savior of the West. The truth is the wagon train: if we don’t get there together, we won’t get there at all.” Of if we do get there, we will eat or be eaten, as Buchanan captures the dilemma in these successive lines of dialogue: “Either we root out crime, or we die and this community dies with us.” And: “We must make it safe for those who cannot act for themselves. For families.”

This novel is, in effect, a story of the survival – against great odds – of both community and family. This is evident enough in the romantic turn of the narrative, which though apparent at a fairly early stage, builds slowly and involves not just the relationship of a man and a woman but that of a man and a woman to her children, biological seed of an ill-starred previous marriage.

The brutal irony at story’s center, of course, is that domestic peace seems in this instance only achievable by the violent and extra-constitutional activities of the Vigilance Committee. It is to the author’s credit that she treats the issue frankly and unsentimentally, without taking sides in the inevitable debate between those who would hang the conspirators and those who, for moral qualms, hesitated – just as the reader surely hesitates in this time of real and trumped-up cases for war, and the ever-present American debate

about capital punishment.

Buchanan certainly pulls no punches. While the reader might be persuaded by her story's apparent heroes' calculation that it was, in their particular contingency, kill or be killed, it is an uneasy persuasion punctuated by the unflinching description of botched executions that, except for their not involving poorly administered lethal injections, might have emerged from the present debate. Rather than the scenes themselves, which I will not replay, what most interests here is the moral and ethical debate.

"If anyone had asked him while he was still in New York," Buchanan narrates, "Dan would have said that a Vigilance Committee was a mob of men inflamed by drink, hysterical, morally certain and immorally wrong, spontaneously moving by night to lynch someone – black or white – for their own purpose. Outside the law. He would never in a million years have described a Vigilance Committee as a group of the most sober citizens, lawyers, merchants, and law officers, who organized themselves carefully into an Executive Committee, with companies led in quasi-military fashion by themselves or other citizens of equal rectitude. Yet the meeting today had ground along absorbed in administrative detail. The boring construction of an administration as bound in red tape as any government body. As boring as a legislative meeting, and he was immured in it all. All the discussion, the voting, the agreement never put in writing, but remembered.

"The biggest task to separate personal motives from the public good, like curd from whey. Knowing beforehand that it would not be perfect."

Even so, despite all precautions, lethal force, once unleashed, is hard to contain, and laws of chaos and of unintended consequences portend savagery enough to stain the best of causes and haunt the dreams of any surviving conscience.

At one point, midway along the path of apparently unavoidable killing, Dan reflects on his misgivings, the certainty he'd always sought in order "to keep his conscience clear, to give history nothing to condemn them for," but now he just wanted it over, "the killing, he was sick of it all. Sick of the excuses they gave as long as they were on top and had men afraid of them, sick of their terror when they had no pity for their victims, and sick of the reek of shit and the piss on the front of their trousers. The jerking bodies and purple swollen tongues would live in his mind and foul his dreams until he died."

In the end he and his fellow vigilantes are more successful than the would-be restorers, say, of Rome's ancient Republic, of which I have just now been reading in Anthony Everitt's 2001 biography of the great orator / philosopher / politician Cicero. But the contingencies of both moments leave as many questions as answers – probably more. Not even in hindsight is anything self-evident.

That being the case, it strikes me that those who might argue – with the indomitable ex-Vice President – that war is always the answer, should take little comfort from the lessons of either story; yet, by the same token, that those of us on the Left, so prone to think that war never is the answer, might speak with a modicum of humility while nevertheless pressing the current President on matters associated with war and peace: it is hard to imagine the competing pressures he faces from within and without the government – and to fathom the delicate balancing act between what might be either his long-term success or failure.