

Some books are immediately successful and widely read at the time of their publication. Others are significant for the social, political, or moral controversy they arouse. Some few are destined to become classics, attracting new readers from later generations. A handful of books transcend the limits of time and place, their relevancy lying in the fundamental questions that link past to present and one people to another. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* achieves all of these ends, and Harriet Beecher Stowe was uniquely placed to be its author.

Born in Litchfield, Connecticut, on June 14, 1811, Harriet Elizabeth Beecher was the daughter of Roxana Goote Beecher, a woman devoted to prayer, and Lyman Beecher, an eminent Congregational minister and founder of the American Bible Society. Beecher's orthodox beliefs included a specific plan of salvation and a high moral standard. He read from the Bible with passion during family devotions, and he taught his children to defend their beliefs. Lyman Beecher was also active in the antislavery movement. He preached a series of sermons against slavery and encouraged family discussions on this and other important issues of the time.

The Beecher children were intelligent and well-educated. Harriet's brother, Henry Ward Beecher became the most renowned preacher of his day and was active in the abolitionist movement. Her eldest sister, Catharine, founded Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut, where Harriet was enrolled in 1823. There she received a solid education, unusual for girls at that time, and later became an assistant teacher at the school.

In 1832 Lyman Beecher was appointed president of the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. Harriet and Catharine moved to Cincinnati with their father and co-founded The Western Female Institute there. Harriet taught at the school until her marriage in 1836 to Calvin Stowe, a professor of Biblical Literature at Lane and a passionate opponent of slavery. The Stoves had seven children; their sixth child, Charley, died in a cholera epidemic before he was two years old. The agony of this loss awakened in Harriet an understanding of the pain a slave woman must feel when her child was sold away from her.

Harriet's earliest publication was a children's geography book which she co-authored with her sister Catharine. It was published in 1823 under Catharine's name. Harriet's own writing career began in 1834 when her first story was published in a magazine. She then began writing poems and articles for religious publications and housekeeping manuals. Mrs. Stowe was a prolific writer and over the course of her career, she wrote travel books, biographical sketches, children's books, studies of social life, a book of religious poems, and at least 10 novels. Many of her books were popular, but none achieved the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The Cincinnati years provided much of the impetus for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Located on the Ohio River, the border between Ohio (a free state) and Kentucky (a slave state), Cincinnati was literally right across the river from the slave trade. The city was filled with former slaves as well as slaveholders and slave traders. The citizens of Cincinnati were evenly split for and against slavery. While Harriet had been exposed to antislavery sentiments all her life, in Cincinnati she heard both sides of the issue and viewed first hand some of the devastating effects of slavery. At this time also, Mrs. Stowe became familiar with the underground railroad, a network of people and "safe houses" for helping runaway slaves to reach freedom. While Mrs. Stowe may have had ideas for using her writing ability to help in the fight against slavery for some time, the final inducement came with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. This law granted southerners the right to pursue runaway slaves in free states. The law prohibited assistance to runaways and mandated their return to their former owners. This meant that many former slaves who had made their homes in the free states had to flee to Canada. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was Harriet Beecher Stowe's direct response to this damaging piece of legislation. Mrs. Stowe's goal was to convince readers of the necessity of ending slavery by illustrating its horrors, and to point out the moral responsibility of the entire nation for tolerating slavery anywhere within its borders. The complacency of the North, she insisted, allowed the institution to exist.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was initially published in the *National Era*, a weekly antislavery journal. The *National Era* had only a small circulation, and its readers were already sympathetic to the antislavery cause, but the installments of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* began to be passed around widely and reached a large audience. Because of its popularity in serial form, *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly* was published in its entirety on March 20, 1852. Response to the novel was overwhelming. Ten thousand copies were sold in the first week, and three hundred thousand by the year's end. These numbers were phenomenal for the time; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* broke all sales records of its day. Hundreds of thousands of copies were sent abroad as the novel was translated into more than 60 languages. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became one of the most widely read and important books of its time, and Harriet Beecher Stowe became the best known American female writer of the 19th century.

Not all response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was favorable, however. Southerners attacked Mrs. Stowe's credibility and argued that Uncle Tom was not a true representation of American slavery. Abolitionists were dissatisfied because the novel endorsed sending free blacks back to Africa. Many conservatives attacked Mrs. Stowe for her impropriety. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet certainly went beyond what was acceptable for female writers of the day. She wrote about the most controversial issue of her time, published under her own name, and touched upon subjects no woman should discuss. None of these criticisms stopped the success of the novel, however.

Uncle Tom's Cabin made Mrs. Stowe a celebrity and provided her many opportunities to speak publicly against slavery. Stung by accusations that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presented a false image of Southern slavery, Mrs. Stowe went on to write *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was published in 1853. In it, she presented her source material for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and extensively documented the realities upon which the novel was based. Ultimately, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a unifying element for the antislavery movement. Many historians even credit the novel with contributing to the outbreak of the Civil War. Mrs. Stowe was invited to meet Abraham Lincoln in 1862, shortly before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Legend has it that the President greeted Mrs. Stowe as "the little lady who caused this great big war." While this story may be exaggerated, it is certainly true that Harriet Beecher Stowe was a powerful and influential voice in a debate of vital importance to the nation. For Harriet, however, the debate over political concerns was also the opportunity to be the voice for the hundreds of thousands of oppressed individuals who had no voice of their own. By background, education, temperament, and even geography, Harriet Beecher Stowe was well-suited to be the writer of an important antislavery work. But the power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lies in the personal stories of its characters. In this respect, too, Mrs. Stowe was shaped by her circumstances to write from her heart. In a letter to a friend, Harriet wrote,

I have been the mother of seven children, the most beautiful and most loved of whom lies near my Cincinnati residence. It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her. In those depths of sorrow which seemed to me immeasurable, it was my only prayer to God that such anguish might not be suffered in vain. . . . I felt I could never be consoled for it unless this great crushing of my own heart might enable me to work out some great good to others.

I allude to this here because I have often felt that much that is in that book had its root in the awful scenes and bitter sorrow of that summer. It has left . . . a deep compassion for the sorrowful, especially for mothers who are separated from their children.



Harriet Beecher Stowe to Eliza Cabot Follen, Dec. 16, 1852