

Uncle Tom's Cabin
by
Harriet Beecher Stowe

2002 is the 150th anniversary of the publication of "Uncle Tom's Cabin". To honor Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was born, raised and learned to write in Connecticut the Beecher House Society is loaning their first edition, in two volumes, of the book and posters made from the 6 illustrations. This exhibit celebrates this important event in Connecticut's rich history in the fight for freedom and equality.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s syllabus lists "the thirteen books you must read to understand America", *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one. Schlesinger says "All countries are hard to understand, and despite its brief history, the United States of America is harder to understand than most, because of its size in dreams, because of its obstreperousness, and because of its heterogeneity. Still, for all this, the United States has an unmistakable national identity. Here.. are books that have described, defined, and enriched America's sense of itself...these particular choices illuminate in a major way what Ralph Ellison called 'the mystery of American identity': how we Americans are at once many and one."

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852). She was forty years old, the wife of a professor of biblical literature, the mother of seven children, when her indignation over the forced return of slaves to bondage under the Fugitive Slave Act led her to write the most influential novel in American history. The book sold three hundred thousand copies in its first year – equivalent to a sale of three million copies in the 1990s. '*So this is the little lady who made this big war,*' Lincoln is supposed to have said to her.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is remembered for its vivid depiction of the horrors of slavery – and often misremembered, because so many images derive from the stage versions rather than from the novel itself. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is far more than the sentimental melodrama of 'the Tom shows.' It is a wonderful shrewd and nuanced panorama of American life in the decade before the Civil War, rich in its variety of characters, settings, and perceptions. Mrs. Stowe may not in every respect meet contemporary standards of political correctness, but she was radical for her time in her insights and sympathies – one of the first, for example, to use the term *human rights*. Frederick Douglass called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a book '*plainly marked by the finger of God.*'"

Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Weapon of War

Remarks delivered on the 150th Anniversary of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Robert P. Forbes,
Associate Director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and
Abolition at Yale University

Litchfield Inn, Litchfield, Connecticut, March 20, 2002

How wonderfully appropriate that the publication date of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the first day of spring! It is fitting, too, that this first spring day is one of the wintriest we have had this year. Harriet's book appeared as a warm ray of sun to melt Americans' icy hearts at a time when the nation had seemed to capitulate to the spirit of a Fugitive Slave Act that made all Northerners complicit with slave-catchers, when some of the stoutest abolitionist hearts seemed ready to give up the fight, and when it seemed that the winter of slavery had descended upon the country forever.

And yet, this seemingly apt symbolism points to a problem—one that is common in the work that I do as a historian interested in the process of social change. While we sometimes *feel* that winter will last forever—(though not this year, when it never even came)—, we know that spring *will* eventually arrive, of its own accord. Year in and year out, the seasons follow each other in a natural rhythm that *usually* has little to do with our actions as human beings.

There is a great temptation to imagine that *history* works the same way. Like music critics, who have no particular concern with all the hours of practicing that go into a

performance, historians and other sideline commentators tend to ignore the hard work that underlies social change. "Progress" seems to be an engine that propels itself. If it is true, as has been said, that nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come, it is also the case that nothing looks so powerless as an idea whose time has gone. Slavery, the conventional wisdom once said, was a dying institution that would soon have collapsed of its own weight, if people like Mrs. Stowe had just waited patiently, and the nation could eventually have enjoyed the blessing of freedom without having had to endure the catastrophe of civil war.

Meanwhile, other modern commentators, noting that slavery is gone but racism lives on, have little interest in premature congratulations for a job not yet finished. Since slavery is today an abstraction, while racism, in its subtler modern forms and occasionally in its full-blown, blatant, traditional variety, is a continuing reality, the audacity and sacrifices of the abolitionists—as well as the evil of the system they combated—are often overlooked, while their shortcomings in matters of cultural sensitivity and inclusive language are made much of. It is perhaps a measure of Harriet's success that we are able to turn our focus to matters of such relative delicacy.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, in contrast, had more urgent concerns, and a more deadly enemy. Her most famous work, whose publication we are commemorating today, was not intended as a social commentary. Nor is it, in principle, a novel. Harriet wrote wonderful novels; read *The Minister's Wooing* for a wry portrait of the lives and loves of blacks and whites in revolutionary Newport. It would be closer to the truth to say that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a piece of propaganda; but that has connotations of insincerity and manipulation that do not appropriately describe it. In

fact, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a weapon of war. The proper measure of its effectiveness is not its literary quality, or whether it portrays its characters with adequate sensitivity and understanding, but how well it destroys the defenses of the enemy.

Stowe's enemy, it must be stressed, was not the South, which she loved, or slaveholders, for whom she sympathized; but slavery itself. Her greatest gift was her penetrating dissection of the *institutional* evil of slavery, and of its corrupting effect on the whole nation. While Northern ministers debated whether slaveholders could be good Christians, Stowe portrayed a decent, God-fearing slaveholder who vows to free his slaves—but whose death throws them into the maw of the domestic slave market. Her one true villain, the evil overseer Simon Legree, is a transplant from the North. Northern congressmen, churchgoers, even abolitionists, are no better and no worse than Southerners. Stowe's slavery is a national institution, not a sectional one.

In fact, the post-war Harriet delivered the most searing national indictment of slavery I have ever encountered. North American Review, 1879, Harriet discussed the persecution of Prudence Crandall and other offenses against supporters of black education:

This apparently unaccountable sensitiveness of the Northern mind becomes intelligible when we consider that there were as really slaveholders in the Northern as the Southern States. Negro slaves were the assets of every Southern estate, plantation, and firm; they were offered as security for debt, and the large commercial business of the North with the South was carried on upon this basis. There were abundance of rich slaveholders in Northern churches, who felt with the keen instinct of self-interest anything which interfered with their gains, and who did not wish to have trouble of conscience, and they hated the negro because he aroused this uncomfortable faculty. The Northern abolitionist proclaimed that to buy, hold, or sell a human being for gains was a sin against God, and, like all other sins, to be immediately repented of and forsaken. Now, when a New York merchant got a letter from his lawyer, apprising him that he had taken twenty thousand dollars' worth of negroes as security for his debt, and returned answer to

sell and remit, it was but natural that he should hereafter be very excitable under such teachings, and denounce them as incendiary and fanatical. The bitterness of Southern slaveholders was tempered by many considerations of kindness for servants born in their houses, or upon their estates; but the Northern slaveholder traded in men and women whom he never saw, of whose separations, tears, and miseries he determined never to hear.¹

No contemporary abolitionist, nor any modern historian I have read, has offered a more telling institutional analysis of slavery. The insights of this great woman are as timely now as they were 150 years ago. I urge you, on this snowy night: Read the book! Learn from her polemical genius. Then apply yourselves to understand the institutional evils of our own time, and go and fight them.

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Education of Freemen," *The North American Review*, volume 128, (June 1879), 606.