

Sarah Robbins



The Cambridge **Introduction** to  
Harriet Beecher Stowe

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*The Cambridge Introduction to  
Harriet Beecher Stowe*

Through the publication of her bestseller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe became one of the most internationally famous and important authors in nineteenth-century America. Today, her reputation is more complex, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been debated and analyzed in many different ways. This book provides a summary of Stowe's life and her long career as a professional author, as well as an overview of her writings in several different genres. Synthesizing scholarship from a range of perspectives, the book positions Stowe's work within the larger framework of nineteenth-century culture and attitudes about race, slavery and the role of women in society. Sarah Robbins also offers reading suggestions for further study. This introduction provides students of Stowe with a richly informed and accessible introduction to this fascinating author.

Sarah Robbins is Professor of English at Kennesaw State University, Georgia.

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# The Cambridge Introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe

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SARAH ROBBINS



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## Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	x
<b>Chapter 1 Life</b>	1
Beecher lore and community vision	1
A Beecher education for social agency	3
Navigating Cincinnati as a cultural “contact zone”	4
Composing <i>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</i> while housekeeping in Maine	6
Traveling as an international celebrity	8
Re-envisioning New England domesticity	9
The lure of the south	10
Final days in Hartford	11
<b>Chapter 2 Cultural contexts</b>	13
Middle-class womanhood	13
Writing American literature	16
Racial politics	19
Religion	21
Class identity	23
<b>Chapter 3 Works</b>	26
Early writings	26
<i>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</i>	30
Stowe’s <i>Key</i> , <i>Dred</i> , and <i>The Christian Slave</i>	61
Dramatizing <i>Uncle Tom’s Cabin</i>	76

Travel writing	82
New England regionalist fiction	89
Additional late-career writings	94
 <b>Chapter 4 Reception and critics</b>	 99
US readers' regional differences	100
Antebellum blacks as readers	105
African Americans' responses in a new century	111
Nineteenth-century European responses	113
Twentieth-century literary criticism	117
New directions in Stowe studies	121
 <i>Notes</i>	 124
<i>Further reading</i>	132
<i>Index</i>	138



## Preface

Harriet Beecher Stowe is a familiar name to students of literature and history. However, many of the details we “know” about her and about her most famous book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, are based more in myth than in her actual life. One of the goals of this book is to peel back the sometimes contradictory elements of that mythology. Another is to position her work within the context of her own day, while also acknowledging the major critical controversies that have swarmed around her since then.

Although Stowe was a major figure in American and world literary culture throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, she faded from view through much of the twentieth. Feminist scholarship re-ignited interest in Stowe in the 1970s, and research on her life and writing has expanded a good deal since then. Questions about the literary value of her publications and about her personal attitudes on race continue to puzzle general readers and academics, however. And these questions provide one major rationale for studying Stowe today.

Acquiring a clear sense of Stowe’s life, her writing, and its place in literary history can be challenging, given the wide range of opinions about her. This book will serve as a basic introduction to such topics. The “Life” chapter offers a biographical overview. “Cultural Contexts” provides a survey of significant issues and trends shaping Stowe’s career. The “Works” chapter explores her major publications. Because *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* continues to claim the most intense critical attention, and because it was so significant a force in Stowe’s own time, much of the “Works” chapter concentrates on that text and Stowe’s related anti-slavery writing (*A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*; and *The Christian Slave*). Other writings are much more briefly introduced, including examples of her regionalist fiction, her travel writing, and her social satire. The overview for each of Stowe’s major works includes a concise treatment of the plot, themes, and major characters, with some explanation of key topics recurring in criticism. The “Reception” chapter outlines ways that various groups of readers, influential critics, and other literary artists have responded to Stowe, particularly to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Learning about

the controversies surrounding *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – and their links to literary history – is crucial, since so much of what we see of her today is the product of many divergent responses to her first novel.

For an extensive biographical treatment and analysis of how Stowe's life was shaped by the culture of her lifetime, readers can consult Joan Hedrick's prize-winning 1994 biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. Those who would like to learn more about Stowe's individual publications can consult *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (ed. Cindy Weinstein) and the list of secondary criticism at the end of this volume.

## Acknowledgments

Many generous colleagues have contributed to this book. Susan Belasco recommended I take on the project in the first place – providing a strong vote of confidence for an otherwise very daunting task. Student research assistant Louise Sherwood carried source-seeking to a new level. Kennesaw State University's Interlibrary Loan staff provided unflagging assistance securing materials, and the Bentley Special Collections librarians found just the right cover art. While I was drafting, students in several courses provided insightful feedback.

Special thanks to colleagues who read sections of the manuscript. Debra Rosenthal checked multiple chapters, sending thoughtful suggestions via email from England. LeeAnn Lands, Catherine Lewis, and Ann Pullen gave careful input on historical analysis. Anne Richards, Laura McGrath, and Katarina Gephardt provided timely readings of core chapters. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders and Mark Sanders gave encouraging and enlightening feedback on my discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the responses of various audiences, and the history of criticism.

Ray Ryan, Elizabeth Davey and Maartje Scheltens at Cambridge were supportive guides throughout the project's many stages.

Families of literary historians have to be patient when long-dead writers come to live with us, taking up physical space with books and papers, but also claiming time and energy. Harriet Beecher Stowe can be a particularly insistent presence. I am lucky to have a husband (John) and two daughters (Margaret and Patty) who have been kind enough to let her stay around for so long.

## Abbreviations

The abbreviations below are used for frequently cited sources within both the text and endnotes.

<i>Agnes</i>	<i>Agnes of Sorrento</i>
<i>Cambridge Companion to HBS</i>	<i>The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe</i> , edited by Cindy Weinstein
<i>Dred</i>	<i>Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp</i>
<i>HBS</i>	<i>Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life</i> , by Joan D. Hedrick
<i>Key</i>	<i>A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>
<i>Life</i>	<i>Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Compiled from Her Letters and Journals</i> , by Charles Stowe
<i>Life and Letters</i>	<i>Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe</i> , edited by Annie Fields
<i>PL</i>	<i>Palmetto Leaves</i>
<i>PW</i>	<i>Pink and White Tyranny</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands</i>
"UL"	"Uncle Lot"
<i>UTC</i>	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>

## Chapter 1

# Life

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Beecher lore and community vision	1
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Traveling as an international celebrity	8
Re-envisioning New England domesticity	9
The lure of the south	10
Final days in Hartford	11

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s life mirrored that of many other white, middle-class women of her generation. But her highly productive writing career set her apart in a number of ways. While other nineteenth-century American women authors like Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Fanny Fern (Sara Parton) and Frances Harper also had notable success, Stowe was unusual in the range of genres she helped shape and in her ability to call upon diverse resources to support her work. Many of her professional opportunities derived from her family connections, which mitigated gender-based constraints faced by other women of her day.

## Beecher lore and community vision

Stowe’s Beecher family lineage had a significant impact on the way her contemporaries perceived her. During her lifetime, family members and friends worked hard to create an image that would appeal to her reading audience. During her declining years, her son Charles Stowe wrote the first authorized biography, where he cast *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as “a work of religion” guided by the same republican principles that had motivated the Declaration of Independence and “made Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, and Patrick Henry anti-slavery men.”<sup>1</sup> Around the same time, Florine Thayer McCray, a Hartford neighbor,

prepared another biography. McCray built her book to a rousing conclusion celebrating “the noble legacy” of Stowe’s writings and “the priceless heritage of her personal example.”<sup>2</sup> Close friend Annie Fields published *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* in 1897, just after Stowe’s death, reinforcing the message that the author’s career had been unselfishly dedicated to the anti-slavery cause. The cumulative power of such texts initiated a meaning-making *process* distinctive from the actual historical person Harriet Beecher Stowe. Therefore, we need to recognize that much of what we think we know about her – such as the anecdote Annie Fields told about Abraham Lincoln’s crediting Stowe with starting the Civil War – is strategic lore that should be read critically.<sup>3</sup> However saintly the initial guardians of her heritage painted her, Stowe’s life was more complex than the legends they promoted.

This collaborative enterprise of representing “Harriet Beecher Stowe” in an array of nineteenth-century texts was also supported by the author’s own astute management of her career. Though her reputation would always remain tied to her major bestseller, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she capitalized on that milestone with later writing in a range of genres, while helping to shape the development of American literature. Overall, she was unique in her time for the breadth and influence of her work as an American woman writer.

At the heart of her success was a vision of New England life as a stand-in for an idealized America. This view of Protestant, middle-class New England as representing the best of republican values would permeate her writing, even in those moments when her satirical pen highlighted its flaws. In drawing on imagined versions of a moral social order, Stowe tapped into a tradition beginning as far back as the founding of New England in the 1600s. In the colonial era, Puritan settlers saw their new home as an extension of England but also as a special domain of God’s chosen people. Over time, progressing toward a new republic, the highly literate, middle-class leaders of New England maintained their ties with the home country (for example, in choosing place names) but also formed a distinctive American identity organized around their regional culture. Thus, “creating New England, that is, imaginatively drawing the boundaries of regional identity, involved an ongoing process of cultural negotiation.”<sup>4</sup> In the nineteenth century, Stowe’s Beecher family members contributed to this agenda through social activism and self-conscious cultural production.

Stowe’s own unending search for an ideal community, grounded in deep religious principles but also in a recognition of human frailties, would shape her life choices as well as her writing. In family moves to antebellum Cincinnati, her multiple journeys to Europe, the Stowes’ extended trips to Florida, and her “model housekeeping” designs for homes back in New England, we can see

a parallel to Stowe's literary imaginings of utopian communities. Meanwhile, even as she drew on increasingly varied contacts with cultures different from her native region, these moves into new geographic and psychic spaces did not ever dislodge her deep-seated ties to a traditional vision of American social virtue.

## A Beecher education for social agency

From the outset, Harriet Beecher Stowe's upbringing envisioned possibilities for cultural influence both enabled and constrained by her gender. Born in 1811, she grew up in Litchfield, Connecticut, where her father worked as a Congregational minister. The seventh child of Roxana Foote Beecher and Lyman Beecher, Harriet came into a family that set high expectations for all its children. Yet, conscious of the limitations she would face as a woman, Lyman Beecher is reported to have said early on that he wished Harriet had been born a boy, since she showed signs already of being able to outshine her brothers.

Young Harriet attended an unusually progressive school, the Litchfield Academy. She excelled in John Brace's composition class, her favorite. When she won a writing contest and had her work read aloud at a school exposition, she was excited to see her father's intent interest in her text – even before she had been identified as the author. If Lyman Beecher's rapt listening marked the writing as worthwhile, Harriet would declare in a memoir years later, she knew she had achieved a meaningful accomplishment.

At age 13, Harriet became a boarder at the Hartford Female Seminary, then led by her eldest sister Catharine. The younger sister quickly moved from student to assistant teacher. Even though Harriet's later success as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has obscured this period in her professional development, it is important to recognize the connections between her literary arguments for women's social influence and this early experience.

Later, during Catharine's long absence for a rest cure, Harriet served as head administrator. In exploring ideas about female learning through collaboration with other young women attending the seminary, Harriet Beecher came up with a governance plan less hierarchical than her sister had used. Harriet's was a system based on collaborative "circles" for team management. Her letters to Catharine during this period reflect the younger sister's enthusiasm for teaching, but also for institution-building.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on the expanding possibilities for women's education, Harriet was envisioning the first of many utopian programs that she would promote over a lifelong career as a reformer.

The reputation of the Hartford Female Seminary grew so much that it attracted bright young women from the midwest and south as well as from New England.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this work exposed Harriet to a broader range of social interaction than we might expect. By adding more challenging elements to the curriculum than was typical in most young women's institutions, the seminary had also earned praise from advocates for female education, including Sarah Josepha Hale. A pioneer in the field, the seminary provided an apt training ground for students – but also for the Beecher sisters themselves.<sup>7</sup> The one discouraging challenge impeding the institution was financial. Catharine eventually became so frustrated with supporters' inability to raise a substantial endowment that she welcomed an invitation from her father to relocate to Cincinnati, Ohio, then considered an outpost of the American west.

### Navigating Cincinnati as a cultural “contact zone”

Arriving in Cincinnati in 1832, Catharine and Harriet laid out ambitious plans to open schools for children and young ladies, while their father headed up Lane Seminary. Writing to her friend Georgiana May back east, Harriet declared: “We mean to turn over the West by means of *model schools* in this, its capital” (qtd in Charles Stowe, *Life*, p. 72).

Harriet's years in Cincinnati represented a defining time in her life, since her experiences there promoted her growth as both a teacher and a writer, and later as a married woman juggling domestic activities with authorship aspirations. In the antebellum era, Cincinnati represented many of the possibilities associated with a thriving American culture. Though less refined than New England, the city was attracting numerous settlers from the northeast, and this group aimed to transplant the values of their home region into this western crossroads.

Central to this endeavor, for those in the Beecher family's social group, was the Semicolon Club, a combination social and literary society. Stowe was at first so nervous about presenting her writing that she carried out elaborate steps to conceal her identity as author of one early sketch. Although most of the texts by the club's members were never formally published, but simply presented orally at their regular gatherings, the opportunity to have her writing shared publicly marked an important stage in Harriet Beecher's development as an author. Harriet actually captured an award for “Uncle Lot,” an 1833 piece she originally wrote for the club and afterwards submitted to a contest. The prize money for this narrative sketch, which was published in James Hall's *Western Monthly Magazine*, affirmed her writerly aspirations. In addition, the vision of New England life that she achieved in her Semicolon Club sketches