

H A R R I E T
B E E C H E R
S T O W E



a life

J O A N D . H E D R I C K

Harriet Beecher Stowe



Harriet Beecher Stowe, late 1870s. Photograph by Sarony. (*Stowe-Day Foundation, Hartford, Connecticut*)

HARRIET
BEECHER
STOWE
A Life

JOAN D. HEDRICK

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For Travis

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Preface

"Are there any lives of women?"

"No, my dear," said Mr. Sewell; "in the old times, women did not get their lives written, though I don't doubt many of them were much better worth writing than the men's."

Harriet Beecher Stowe,
The Pearl of Orr's Island

Few in the nineteenth century could have doubted that Harriet Beecher Stowe's life was worth writing. When she met Abraham Lincoln at the White House in 1862, the lanky, angular president is said to have greeted Stowe, who stood less than five feet high, with the words, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!" Catapulted to international fame with the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe became one of America's best-paid and most-sought-after writers. At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 Stowe's works were accorded a position of honor in the library of the Woman's Building. Displayed in an elliptical mahogany case with glass all around were first editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a special edition of twenty volumes of her works bound in calf, translations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into forty-two languages, including Armenian, Illyrian, Servian, Russian, and Welsh, and a letter announcing two editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the Island of Java.¹

Stowe's very success has made it difficult to evaluate her role in our cultural history. In a life that spanned all but fifteen years of the nineteenth century Stowe spoke to a nation deeply divided by race, sex, region, and class. Speaking to the masses meant negotiating diverse and even contradictory cultures. How successfully she accomplished this, and with what cost to various subcultures, continues to be a subject of fierce debate. In her time southern readers objected to her portrayal of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In our time African Americans have objected to Stowe's racial stereotypes. To engage her life is to engage the plurality and contradiction of American culture.

It is also to challenge twentieth-century notions of art and excellence. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not only translated into foreign tongues, it was transmuted into song, theater, statuary, toys, games, handkerchiefs, wallpapers,

plates, spoons, candlesticks, and every form of kitsch that the commercial mind could imagine—a phenomenon that puts it on the level of the Davy Crockett fad of the 1950s or the Ninja Turtle craze of the 1980s. Can anything so popular be considered “art?” By the canons of academic scholarship, “popular” writers cannot pretend to the status of “artists.” Yet Stowe’s nineteenth-century popularity was not framed by such notions of cultural hierarchy.²

Stowe began her career in the parlor, writing stories for a Cincinnati literary club. Writing during the transition of literature from an amateur pastime to a business, Stowe’s career marks both the flowering and the passing of what I call “parlor literature.” Written for entertainment, instruction, and amusement, meant to be read aloud, these domestic literary productions were an integral part of polite society in antebellum America and were as accessible to women as to men. Before literature split into “high” and “low” forms in the 1850s and 60s, best-selling novels were extensions of parlor literature.

At a time when literature was not a particularly respected or lucrative occupation, Harriet Beecher was one of many women who began writing sketches and stories for magazines. Speaking in the conversational voice of a parlor letter writer, she addressed a nation in the throes of a vast transformation: the creation of a national culture. It is not incidental that her first book was a geography. Her 1830s sketches of regional types introduced the American West and the American East to one another, pioneering the use of dialect. Although she wrote a volume of religious poetry, Stowe’s “hankering for slang” and delight in the rhythms of everyday speech made prose her natural element. “Did you ever think of the rythmical power of prose,” she wrote to George Eliot, “how every writer when they get warm fall into a certain swing & rhythm peculiar to themselves the words all having their place and sentences their cadances.”³ In 1839 her stories began appearing in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the only periodical that, by soliciting and paying for original material, supported the development of American authors and American literature.

As the national culture and the publishing business reached the takeoff stage in the 1850s, women were strategically placed to profit from a sphere of activity that had been inadvertently left to their busy hands. Precisely because literature had not been professionalized, because it was only just beginning to be recognized as an occupation that might honorably support an independent life, women were allowed to practice what became for many a highly lucrative and influential career. “The ninth wave of the nineteenth century is the Destiny of Woman,” concluded Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, as she surveyed at midcentury the extraordinary burst of literary activity: “Within the last fifty years more books have been written by women and about women than all that had been issued during the preceding five thousand years.”⁴ Writing women were both a symptom of the social history of the nineteenth century and a powerful force in shaping it.

With the emergence of best-sellers like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1851) and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, women showed how much could be achieved. "It is women who read," wrote Nathaniel Willis in 1859. "It is women who give or withhold a literary reputation. It is the women who regulate the style of living. . . . It is the women who exercise the ultimate control over the Press."⁵

Just as Stowe's rise had to do with her apprenticeship in the parlor, so her decline resulted from the removal of literature from the parlor to institutions to which women had limited access: men's clubs, high-culture journals, and prestigious universities. As literature became professionalized, the voice of the novelist became depersonalized and the standards of art became matters for aesthetic consideration rather than political passion. Influencing public opinion became less important than creating a beautiful product. As the standards for judging literature changed and the voice of the novelist became more formal and distanced, Stowe's writing was judged to be amateur, unprofessional, and "bad art."

This did not happen, however, without a political struggle. It is revealing to read in the pages of the *Nation* reviews so hostile to women writers that one contemporary observer suggested the magazine should have been called the "Stag-Nation." In savage reviews of Rebecca Harding Davis and other literary realists, the young Henry James, cutting his literary teeth in the *Nation*, articulated the agenda of what became known in the twentieth century as the "new criticism," a formalistic approach to literature that focused on the internal, aesthetic properties of the work and eschewed biography, politics, and cultural analysis. Anyone who harbors the belief that this approach to literature has no political implications will be surprised to see the overtness of the struggle in the 1860s between the dominant women writers and the rising literary establishment of men who were determined to displace them.

This struggle was well underway when Florine Thayer McCray wrote the first full-length biography of Stowe in 1889. Raising the question of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* artistic merits, McCray contrasted a Jamesian notion of the "rules of art" to Stowe's shoot-from-the-hip attack on the reader's sensibilities. "It must be a technical mind which can learnedly discuss the work as tested by the criteria of modern art criticism," she wrote. Contrasting Stowe's strongly marked moral and social types with the "emasculated" characters of modern fiction whose virtues and faults were elaborated with "finical anxiety," McCray observed, "[s]he had no inclination to reduce her strong points to the polished level obtained by many writers. Their indecision (which they mistake for liberality) prevents them from making an enduring impress upon the age."⁶ Making an "impress upon the age" was what all of the Beechers aimed to do.

When Stowe learned of McCray's intent to publish a biography of herself, she reacted with alarm. This had nothing to do with McCray's interpretation, which was not unbalanced, nor McCray's unreliability with dates, which

matched that of her subject. It had rather to do with the question of who could claim her life as literary property. All of the Beechers had made a good deal of literary capital out of their daily doings and sayings; from pulpit pronouncements to travel letters to tips on gardening or memorials for the dead, they regularly transformed the material of their everyday lives into magazine copy, and they were as careful stewards of their lives as they were of American culture. After the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe's life was much in demand. In 1868 a literary promoter had urged the Rev. E. P. Parker of South Church in Hartford to write Stowe's biography. The promoter let it be known that if Stowe would not cooperate with Parker, there was another party prepared to write her biography without her consent. Calvin Stowe, suspecting that this other party was Leonard Bacon, editor of the *Independent*, advised Harriet to choose Parker as the lesser of two evils: "Parker, with your consent & aid, would do it faithfully, delicately & well; and if it must be done, would n't that be better than to be paved over with Bacon fat?"⁷ Stowe managed to limit Parker's incursions into her life to a brief sketch compiled from published materials.⁸

Stowe had understood that Florine McCray, an occasional visitor in her Hartford home, had intended to do a similar short sketch, and she sent her a two-sentence letter acknowledging her project. When she learned that McCray's intent was considerably more ambitious, she denounced this putative "authorized biography" by placing the following notice in the newspaper: "Permit me to say, that all reports with regard to any authorised edition of my life, are without foundation. I have placed all the letters & documents for this purpose in the hands of my son & neither he nor I have authorised any one to circulate such reports as have appeared of late in various papers."⁹ She sent out an alert to European friends to retrieve her letters so that she could place them in her son's hands.¹⁰ They complied, and in 1889 Houghton Mifflin published Charles Stowe's *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Compiled from Her Letters and Journals*. A European visitor who called on her during these final years described her as "a wonderfully agile old lady, as fresh as a squirrel still, but with the face and air of a lion."¹¹

After her death in 1896 friends and family closed ranks around her literary remains. Annie Fields, her close friend and wife of her publisher, issued her *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897) the following year. "The moment has at last arrived when the story of Mrs. Stowe's life can be given in full," she announced in her preface, yet her portrait of "one who led the vanguard" in the "great sacrifice" of the Civil War continued the hagiographical mode of Charles Stowe's account of his mother's life. Nor was it interrupted when Charles Stowe coauthored, with Stowe's grandson, Lyman Beecher Stowe, *The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911). There has since been only one attempt at a definitive biography, Forrest Wilson's *Crusader in Crinoline* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1941), now over fifty years old. Since then a wealth of new material has come to light. These include many new letters from

Harriet Beecher Stowe, the letters of Calvin Stowe to Harriet, the “circular letters” the Beecher family wrote to one another in the 1830s and 40s, the diary Charles Beecher kept of Stowe’s 1853 European tour, and many more items. In addition, the civil rights and women’s movements have created new constituencies to contend Stowe’s reputation and significance. It is time for a new biography of Stowe.

A deeply reserved woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe did not reveal herself easily. Her brother Charles remarked that her letters were not “the artless expression of spontaneous emotions. She is not in her letter pouring forth feeling merely because she feels it but planning by the combination of such and such feelings and thoughts to produce a given effect.”¹² Like her father, Harriet was energetic, optimistic, an inveterate believer and a natural preacher. She believed not only in the Christianity of her heritage, but in almost every fad of the nineteenth century. She dabbled in mesmerism and spiritualism and became an avid devotee of the water cure, electricity treatments, and the movement cure. Her uncritical appetite for whatever was in the air led her to mix the profoundest currents of American democracy and religion—such as abolition and perfectionism—with the snake oil of popular culture. Her ready response to currents in her culture enabled her to intervene in that culture and shape it.

Thought of as a “genius” in a family of eccentrics, Stowe was an odd and whimsical woman. Daguerreotypes and photographs of her show a heavy-lidded woman with large cheekbones and full, sensuous lips; those who knew her said that she looked owlish or beautiful, depending on whether she was withdrawn or animated. An irrepressible sense of humor often compressed her lips into a wry expression. She was driven by the Beecher family sense of mission, but she pursued it with a more tolerant and open temperament than Lyman and Catharine, even though she often fell into family and class chauvinisms. She prized individuality and difference though she freely generalized about classes and races. Her approach is well summarized by her conclusion to her sermon on “Intolerance”: “Every human being has some handle by which he may be lifted, some groove in which he was meant to run; and the great work of life, as far as our relations with each other are concerned, is to lift each one by his own proper handle, and run each one in his own proper groove.”¹³ By placing Stowe’s life in the context of her times, I have tried to lift her by her own proper handle, and run her in her own proper groove. At the same time I have tried to place her in frameworks that illuminate the literary history of America during the century in which American literature came into being.

Middletown, Conn.
April 1993

J. H.

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Note on the Text

I have retained original spelling and punctuation in quoting from manuscript sources, making small changes (indicated by brackets) when the meaning might be unclear.

Following is a list of abbreviations used in the notes and parenthetically in the text.

BL	Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
BPL	Boston Public Library
CES	Calvin Ellis Stowe
D	<i>Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp</i>
HBS	Harriet Beecher Stowe
HL	Huntington Library, San Marino, California
HO	Houghton Library, Harvard University
HP	<i>Household Papers and Stories</i>
LF	<i>Little Foxes</i>
MW	<i>The Minister's Wooing</i>
NYPL	<i>The New York Public Library</i>
OF	<i>Oldtown Folks</i>
POI	<i>The Pearl of Orr's Island</i>
PP	<i>Poganuc People</i>
SchL	Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College
SD	Stowe-Day Library, Hartford, Connecticut
SM	<i>Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands</i>
SML	Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University
UMi	Clements Library, University of Michigan
UTC	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>
UVa	Clifton Waller Barrett Library, University of Virginia

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Harriet Beecher Stowe

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CHAPTER ONE



New England Beginnings: 1811–1816

*I*n the northwestern corner of Connecticut the roads rise gradually through heavily forested hills toward the town of Litchfield, Harriet Beecher Stowe's birthplace. Like much of her writing, Litchfield bears the strong stamp of geography and local culture. This is emphatically a New England town. The tall chimneys of the stately Georgian houses march in procession toward the green, which is laid out on the crest of a hill. On the green is the Congregational church, a two-story, white-clapboard building with shuttered windows, its simplicity set off by tall pillars and one of the most beautiful steeples in New England. This orderly, Federal-era town was built around shared values that included a godly hierarchy. Walking from the green down the left side of North Street one comes upon the Tallmadge house. A splendid building with a set of well-proportioned pillars recessed at either side, it bespeaks wealth and cultivation. Like many of the eighteenth-century houses in Litchfield, the Tallmadge house was built around the time of the American Revolution. Just a block down from Major Tallmadge's house is the site of the Litchfield Female Academy, the first women's school in the new nation.

A block beyond the academy, past a fine Georgian house built in 1771 by Lynde Lord, stood a much plainer edifice that was the parsonage for the Congregational minister. Here Lyman Beecher settled his family in 1810. In this two-story, L-shaped frame house, Harriet, the seventh child of Lyman and Roxana Beecher, was born on June 14, 1811. The parsonage has since been moved a few blocks away, where this large building now serves as a

dormitory for the Forman School. During Harriet Beecher's childhood, it was likewise a boardinghouse. The front door opens on a steep stairway to the second floor, where a sloping hallway connects the original structure to the series of additions that Lyman Beecher made to accommodate his growing family and a large number of boarders.

In contrasting ways, Harriet Beecher's parents embodied important spirits of the age. Born in 1775, Lyman Beecher attempted to play a central role in defining the parameters of the emerging national culture. He combined enormous confidence, stamina, and intellect with religious convictions of prophetic intensity. The son and grandson of blacksmiths, he entered the ministry at the beginning of the religious revival called the Second Great Awakening, convinced that "the conversion of the world to Christ was near."¹ Against the secular, revolutionary forces of Tom Paine and the French deists, he arrayed himself in the shining armor of a soldier of Christ. In place of political revolution he enshrined the cataclysm of religious conversion. The first sermon to bring him into national prominence was an attack on the aristocratic institution of dueling, yet he would always be something of a Federalist and a theocrat at odds with the more pluralistic, democratic society that was spreading faster and farther than the fires of religious revival could burn. Describing himself as "harnessed to the chariot of Christ,"² he spent his life winning souls in what turned out to be a futile attempt to outflank the enemy. He died in 1863, just before the onslaught of material and secular excess called the Gilded Age.

Lyman's considerable skills as a military strategist in the crusade for Christ were combined with a remarkable lack of sensitivity to the personal feelings of others and an almost total lack of organization in his private life. As his religious zeal spread in ever-widening circles, from his parish to the nation and the world, it created at home a vortex of paper, books, and ink-blotted notes as well as a residue of moral earnestness and religious perplexity that would become for some of his children an almost intolerable burden. His high spirits, warm and impulsive nature, and extraordinary integrity of vision made him a father and husband to be reckoned with. He wore out two young wives and had been with his third twenty-seven years when he died at the age of eighty-eight. He was married a total of sixty-two years, letting only one year lapse between each wife.

He shrewdly chose women whose family connections and cultivation added polish to his rusticity—and who were highly socialized into women's proper role. He selected his first wife, Roxana, from the lively granddaughters of General Andrew Ward, of Guilford, Connecticut, who served under George Washington in the Revolution. General Ward, who took charge of his daughter's ten children when their father, Eli Foote, died of yellow fever, characterized the three eldest girls in this fashion. When Harriet came down in the morning, she would briskly call, "Here! take the broom; sweep up; make a fire; make haste!" Her sister Betsy would say, "I wonder what ribbon it's best to wear at that party?" But Roxana would say, "Which do you think

was the greater general, Hannibal or Alexander?"³ Fluent in French, Roxana's ready taste in literature made her the "queen" of a circle of home-educated girls who eagerly awaited the arrival of each new book from England. Novel reading was not frowned upon in this worldly circle. Samuel Richardson, Maria Edgeworth, even the bawdy adventures of Fanny Burney's *Evelina* were read and discussed by the girls as they spun flax together. Roxana Foote used to tie books by the best French authors to her distaff and study as she spun.

Judging that Roxana's was the best mind in the family, Lyman Beecher chose her over her sisters. He may have also judged that her gentle and compliant spirit would be more companionable than the satiric wit of her sister Harriet, whom Lyman described as "smart, witty; a little too keen."⁴ Roxana's analytic mind was yoked to a spirit so timid that she could not speak in public without blushing, a reticence so great that even the public duties of a minister's wife were too much for her. But Lyman needed only a sounding board and a domestic regulator; in religious matters, he was general of his own campaign. He declared himself pleased with his choice: "she entered into my character entirely."⁵

Like the good and true heroine of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, Roxana Foote Beecher died young, of an excess of true womanhood. In 1799 she followed her husband to his first parish in East Hampton, Long Island, a raw settlement in which carpets were a rare luxury, many of his parishioners were Montauk Indians, and ministers were expected to live on \$400 a year. There she bore six children in the space of ten years and ran a family school in the house, taking in student boarders from the community. As minister to a sprawling and undeveloped parish, Lyman was, as Roxana wrote to her sister Harriet, "every body's man." Everybody's, that is, but hers. "Last week, for example," she wrote in the winter of 1799, "he preached twice in town and two lectures, besides a funeral sermon on Gardiner's Island, and five sermons to the Indians and white people down at Montauk. He every week lectures at some one of the villages adjoining." He made the circuit of Wainscott, Amagansett, Northwest, and the Springs, and when at home held meetings two and three times a day while Roxana prepared meals and set the house in order—no small task in the midst of Lyman's whirlwind of activity. "This uncommon attention to religion," she remarked, "has brought a good deal of company."⁶ The constant visitors made it impossible for her to write, nor did she have time to spin, let alone to read the books she used to combine with that activity.

In 1808 she gave birth to her fifth child, Harriet. When the baby was a month old she caught whooping cough. Characterized by a spasmodic nightly cough that terminated in a convulsive gasping for breath, whooping cough was epidemic in particular localities every two to four years. It was especially hazardous to infants, who were more likely to wake up choking than coughing. After Roxana had been up night after night with the baby, Lyman told his exhausted wife to get some sleep; she obeyed, and while she

slept the child died. For posterity, Lyman Beecher reported in his *Autobiography* her total absense of "agitation" upon finding her dead baby: "I never saw such resignation to God; it was her habitual and only frame of mind; and even when she suffered most deeply, she showed an entire absence of sinister motives, and an entire acquiescence in the Divine will."⁷

When his parishioners refused to increase his salary, Lyman Beecher left East Hampton in 1810 to answer a call to Litchfield, Connecticut. About a year after his family's arrival in Litchfield, Roxana gave birth to another daughter. Like the baby who had died, she was named Harriet—after Roxana's spirited sister, Harriet Foote. Two years later Henry Ward was born, followed by Charles in 1815. "The first child in a family," Harriet Beecher Stowe would later remark, "is its poem . . . the tenth . . . is *prose*."⁸ Born seventh and eighth in a lineup of thirteen children, the two Beechers who were to become most famous, Harriet and Henry, had to make a loud clamor indeed in order to be recognized. Besides their elder siblings Catharine, William, Edward, Mary, and George, the Litchfield household included Betsy Burr, an orphan cousin who lived with the Beechers until she married; Rachel and Drusilla (Zillah) Crooke, bound servants; several students from Tapping Reeve's Litchfield Law School and as many as eleven boarders from the Litchfield Female Academy; Aunt Mary and Uncle Samuel from Guilford who visited regularly and for lengthy periods; and Grandma Beecher and her unmarried daughter, the legendary Aunt Esther, who came to live in a house close by. To all of these full-time and part-time residents must be added the constant flow of visitors making themselves at home in the minister's house, and the high level of social activity that obtained in this sophisticated town. Who can blame the five-year-old Harriet if she hardly understood after her mother's death that she was gone?

For Lyman Beecher, Litchfield, with its orderly tree-lined streets of white houses marching in straight lines from the centrally located white Congregational church, represented God's plan for the new world. With a law school, a female academy, and some of the most talented and entertaining society in America, Litchfield was a far cry from the sandy beaches of East Hampton, where the Beechers looked across the street to a scene of Indians selling baskets and brooms. Catharine Beecher remembered the first five years of Lyman Beecher's ministry there as a period of "unalloyed happiness" in which Roxana "enjoyed perfect health, and sympathized thoroughly with him in all his tastes and employments."⁹

The texture of Roxana Beecher's days, however, did not change significantly. In the telegraphic style of a busy mother, Roxana explained to her sister-in-law why she has not written:

Would now write you a long letter, if it were not for several vexing circumstances, such as the weather extremely cold, storm violent, and no wood cut; Mr. Beecher gone; and Sabbath day, with company—a clergyman, a stranger; Catharine sick; George almost so; Rachel's finger cut off, and she crying and

groaning with the pain. Mr. Beecher is gone to preach at New Hartford, and did not provide us wood enough to last, seeing the weather has grown so exceedingly cold. . . . As for reading, I average perhaps one page a week, besides what I do on Sundays. I expect to be obliged to be contented (if I can) with the stock of knowledge I already possess, except what I can glean from the conversation of others. . . . Mary has, I suppose, told you of the discovery that the fixed alkalies are metallic oxyds. I first saw the notice in the “*Christian Observer*.” I have since seen it in an “*Edinburgh Review*.” The former mentioned that the metals have been obtained by means of the galvanic battery; the latter mentions another, and, they say, better mode. I think this is all the knowledge I have obtained in the whole circle of arts and sciences of late; if you have been more fortunate, pray let me reap the benefit.¹⁰

What must it have been like to have been curious, intelligent, and a woman in 1815? (And Roxana Foote was among the privileged—what of Zillah and Rachel in the kitchen?) In the days before the common school the level of a woman’s education depended on the level of her family culture, and among the Footes of Guilford this culture had been worldly and elevated. Roxana learned French from an émigré from the French West Indies, she learned of distant lands and strange customs from her world-traveling brother Samuel, she heard the novels of Scott read aloud and read extensively on her own. Then such a one “graduates”—marries and sets up housekeeping on her own. Vision turns inward. Nine babies. One of them always nursing, or on the way, or teething, or ill. Constant visitors. No time to read and reflect, except on the Sabbath, when work was forbidden and she *could* pick up the *Christian Observer*—that is, when she wasn’t attending the morning and afternoon Sabbath meetings and listening to her husband preach. After seventeen years Roxana Beecher was worn out. In 1816 she grew pale and luminous and died of tuberculosis. She was forty-one years old.

At the time of her death Lyman Beecher was involved in some of the most strenuous activity of his career. On the one hand he was leading a highly successful revival in the Litchfield Female Academy, where he was assiduous in holding prayer meetings and counseling students.¹¹ On the other hand he was facing a political and religious crisis such as he had not experienced before: the fall of the Standing Order in Connecticut. The disestablishment in 1818 of the Congregational Church was to Lyman Beecher “the worst attack I ever met in my life”—excepting only, he said, the heresy trials he withstood in the 1830s, when, not coincidentally, his second wife was carried off.¹²

The Beechers accorded Roxana the sainthood her meek and resigned spirit had seemed to court. In the words of one biographer, she “became pure spirit with them all, an ideal, the family’s Virgin Mary, the symbol of all that was most perfect in womanhood.”¹³ Roxana’s beatification began on her deathbed. Although she had shown the signs of consumption for a year, no one noticed her condition until one day, on the way back from a visit to a parishioner, she announced to Lyman that she had had “a vision of heaven

and its blessedness" and would not be much longer with him. Symptoms of rapid consumption soon appeared. She was taken by a chill, followed by fever and exhaustion. Her mind wandered. Acute spastic pains in the pit of her stomach marked her final day. She tried to speak to her children, but could not make her voice heard over their cries and sobs. Her deathbed, however, was not lacking in the Protestant rituals that allowed onlookers to say, after the fact, that her death had been happy. In spite of the fever and the effects of the laudanum she was taking, she had a lucid interval shortly before her death. Gathered around her bed were her good friend and neighbor, Elizabeth Reeve, her sister Harriet, her husband, and all of her children and servants. She told them of "her views and anticipations of heaven" and shared a personal religious triumph that was calculated to reassure them: she had not once, during her illness, prayed for her life. She then dedicated her sons to the ministry of God and prayed, with Lyman leading: "You are now come unto Mount Zion, unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels; to the general assembly and Church of the first-born . . . and to the spirits of just men made perfect."¹⁴

Nineteenth-century readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would have recognized in Stowe's depiction of the death of Eva this distinctively Protestant liturgy. They would have been able to supply, from their own experience, what the liturgy was meant to cover and evoke: the smell of the sickroom, the terror of departure, the awe of eternity. Having scrupulously pruned away the sacramental rituals with which the Roman Catholic Church eased the passage of human beings into and out of this life, evangelical Protestantism reinvented them after its own fashion. It is not surprising that, as they stood on the brink of eternity, with the awful knowledge that the state of one's heart determined for all time one's banishment from or reunion with the elect, these mere mortals embroidered some human assurances of divine favor—and invested the final words of the departed with prophetic power. In such intimate scenes too where death was a common visitor in the house, a close companion for days and nights and weeks, there was comfort in the orderliness of such rituals. In her experience and in her art, death was to be for Harriet Beecher Stowe a source of energy and vision, a transforming event that allowed her to fuse and transcend the gender-coded examples of Lyman and Roxana. One of her favorite hymns was "O mother dear, Jerusalem." Set to a plaintive, lullaby-like German melody in the hymnal of Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church, its nine stanzas describe a vision of heaven embodied in reunion with a mother who ends all sorrows and comforts all griefs:

O mother dear, Jerusalem
 When shall I come to thee?
 When shall my sorrows have an end?
 Thy joys when shall I see?¹⁵

In one respect, Roxana represented a wider circle than the son of the blacksmith. The Episcopal, novel-reading daughter of the well-traveled Foote family was quite a prize, in secular terms, for a humble evangelical minister—and one might well ask what Lyman Beecher thought he was doing in such worldly company. The pity is that this appealing cultural richness almost did not matter later on, so overshadowed was it by the demands of a large household and the rigors of childbearing. But Harriet Beecher Stowe, who went to Europe three times, learned French, and became an avid writer as well as reader of novels, showed herself to be her mother's daughter. She also succeeded, better than her father, in shaping the cultural agenda of the new nation, and a large part of her success was due to the inheritance from her mother. Lyman Beecher's dreams of a united Christian nation foundered on the reality of an emerging pluralistic culture in which his was only one voice among many. He remained to his death a provincial, whereas Harriet was better able to comprehend and translate the competing voices and cultural values of the geographically diverse nation. In part this was the heritage of the seafaring Foote family, in part it was the distinctive heritage of a nineteenth-century women's culture in which mothers were expected to translate the dialects of the spirit in order to smoothe the social interchange in the family.

In one of her novels, Harriet Beecher Stowe described the way this process worked:

In the midst of our large family, of different ages, of vigorous growth, of great individuality and forcefulness of expression, my mother's was the administrative power. My father habitually referred everything to her, and leaned on her advice with a childlike dependence. She read the character of each, she mediated between opposing natures; she translated the dialect of different sorts of spirits, to each other.¹⁶

Here is a matter in which the training of the "angel in the house" has potential for application beyond the domestic sphere, for she who is "a common interpreter, who understands every dialect of the soul" and thus translates "differences of individuality into a common language of love" may also find a way to speak a common language to a mass readership. Combining the prophetic intensity of her father with the literary and cultural heritage of her mother, Harriet Beecher Stowe fused the best of her paternal and maternal heritage. She transformed the role of the angel in the house from a purely self-denying (and ultimately fatal) script into one in which she was a facilitator of and minister to the spirits of others.

CHAPTER TWO



Nutplains: 1811–1816

Women writers, Virginia Woolf reminds us, remember through their mothers.¹ This act of remembering represented a significant literary enterprise for Harriet Beecher, for she admitted that her recollections of her mother were “blurred and confused.”² When the Beechers collected their family memories in the joint effort that would be called *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, Harriet wrote to her brother, “I was between three and four years of age when our mother died, and my own personal recollections of her are therefore but few.”³ She did not even recall her age correctly, for Roxana died in September 1816 when Harriet was five. While this error is not surprising in one who rarely dated letters and often miscalculated her age by a year or two, it is significant. Lodged in the pre-historical recesses of childhood, Harriet’s memories of her mother were susceptible to mythic reworkings.

Lyman Beecher took a strong hand in shaping the family memory of Roxana. “In every scene of family joy or sorrow, or when father wished to make an appeal to our hearts which he knew we could not resist,” remembered Harriet, “he spoke of mother.” These ritual invocations led Harriet to believe that Roxana’s “memory and example had more influence in moulding her family, in deterring from evil and exciting to good, than the living presence of many mothers.” Harriet directed the reader to “[t]he passage in ‘Uncle Tom,’ where Augustine St. Clare describes his mother’s influence.” It is, she said, “a simple reproduction of this mother’s influence as it has always been in her family.”⁴

Harriet had only a few fragmentary recollections of her mother. In one, Roxana says cheerfully, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” In another, Roxana gently reprimands the Beecher children for eating a bag of tulip bulbs under the mistaken impression that they were onions, allowing “not even a momentary expression of impatience” to cross her face.⁵ These fragments confirm the image of Roxana as the Christian mother, quick with precept and example and, like Louisa May Alcott’s “Marmee” in *Little Women*, a stranger to anger and self-assertion. Given the frequency with which this image of Roxana was held forth by Lyman as an example to the Beecher children, it is likely that these two memories were themselves structured through the family’s oral tradition which cast Roxana in the role of the perfectly submissive, pious, and domestic wife. Lyman Beecher’s Roxana could have stepped from the pages of a nineteenth-century advice book for young women in which wives were urged to “become as little children,” to “avoid a controversial spirit,” “to repress a harsh answer, to confess a fault, and to stop (right or wrong) in the midst of self-defense.”⁶

The only other fragment Harriet could recall in later years—and this one is perhaps closer to direct experience—is literary: “I have a recollection of her reading to the children one evening aloud Miss Edgeworth’s ‘Frank,’ which had just come out, I believe, and was exciting a good deal of attention among the educational circles of Litchfield.”⁷ Between 1801 and 1825 Maria Edgeworth published a series of children’s stories designed for education and entertainment. Featuring a precocious child named Frank, mixing dialogue, information, and loosely plotted narrative, each of her *Early Lessons* was designed to take the child through a body of information while at the same time shaping character. Her *Frank*, published in 1801–1802, endeavored to teach six-year-old children some fundamentals of science—and may have been as close as Roxana Beecher was able to get during these years to scientific knowledge.⁸

Harriet’s richest memories of Roxana were entangled with her visits to her mother’s childhood home in Guilford, Connecticut, in an area called Nutplains. By contrast with the Roxana of Litchfield, who was Lyman Beecher’s wife, the Roxana of Nutplains emerged from her own family culture and from a women’s culture thick in associations. Here Roxana was daughter and sister and domestic artist. In Nutplains Harriet’s memories of her mother were shaped by Grandmother Foote (also named Roxana) and her aunts, particularly her mother’s favorite sister, Aunt Harriet.

Grandmother Foote had been beset with a terrible series of family tragedies. In the two-year period following the death of her husband from yellow fever she lost three of her oldest children: a daughter Martha, aged twelve, and two of her sons, Henry, aged sixteen, and Ward, aged seventeen.⁹ In 1813 a fourth child, Mary Ward Hubbard, died of consumption at the age of twenty-eight. When the untimely death of her daughter Roxana was added to her sorrows, she felt a special bond toward this daughter’s children. Edward Beecher reported to his sister Catharine after a visit to Nutplains,

[Grandmother] seems very glad to see me & wishes to hear every word I say & hardly lets me go where she cannot see me—I look she says like mother & to see me recalls to her mind the days when Uncles Samuel John & George with mother & the rest who are gone were young and around her—It always makes me feel melancholy to think of the time when all her children were blooming around her & the valley of Nutplains was cheerful with their sports.¹⁰

The valley of Nutplains did bloom again, in a small way, when in 1816 Grandmother Foote took into her home little Harriet, Roxana's daughter, who was draped in mourning for her mother. Harriet remembered that when she arrived, "Grandmama took me into her lap & cried & I wondered what made a great grown up woman cry to see me."¹¹ Whereas this first visit after her mother's death could have been associated in her later years with the painful memories of loss, for Harriet her visit to Nutplains only increased her sense of belonging and connectedness. Her loss quickly "faded from [her] childish mind."¹² In her account she is wondering at the grief of her grandmother—even as she herself is enfolded within that grandmother's care.

In temper, tone, and religious conviction Nutplains represented a colorful contrast to Litchfield. Nutplains was Episcopal and aristocratic, a place of refinement and culture where children were taught to sit straight in their chairs and say "Yes, Ma'am" and "No, Ma'am." Litchfield was Congregational and democratic, a place of "racket and tear" where rosy-cheeked, rough farm children vied with one another in blackberry picking and wood-chopping. Here things went along in "a free and easy way of living, more congenial to liberty and sociality than to conventional rules." At Nutplains Harriet's grandmother read from her English prayer book the prayers for the king and queen and the royal family; even more piquant, Aunt Harriet worried over the "uncovenanted" state of Lyman Beecher's soul—a lovely reversal for a father whose preoccupation with the "stupid" religious state of his children cast a dark shadow on their young lives. While Harriet's father preached sermons against the "unscriptural" practice of keeping Christmas, her mother's relatives festooned Nutplains with greens and sent the children Christmas presents. The contrasting cultures of Litchfield and Nutplains were dark and light threads woven into the texture of Harriet Beecher's young consciousness.¹³

It is not clear how long Harriet stayed with the Footes in Nutplains, but it was probably at least a year, until Lyman Beecher remarried. Long visits were the norm in those days, and children were frequently distributed at relatives' homes for a season or two. Even before Roxana's illness Harriet had made a long visit at Nutplains, as evidenced by this letter from Roxana to her sister, Harriet Foote:

April 17, 1814

I have not sent for little Harriet on account of the joiner's work we are going to have about soon; but if any circumstance unknown to me makes it expedient she should come home, you must send her with Mr. Beecher. I should have

sent her a flannel slip if I could have found an opportunity, but it is now too late in the spring. You must get shoes for her, and Mr. Beecher must pay for them; and if he should forget it, I will remember. . . . Write me an account of all matters and things respecting both yourselves and little Harriet, whom you must tell to be a good girl, and not forget her mamma, and brothers, and sisters. I hope to come for her some time in the summer or autumn.¹⁴

Thus for the better part of 1814, when she was three years old, Harriet was under the care of Aunt Harriet at Nutplains; the following year Roxana was busy with her new baby, Charles, and Henry Ward, aged two; the year after that she died. Harriet Foote nursed Roxana for six weeks before her death and took little Harriet back to Nutplains with her afterward. It is not surprising that Harriet Beecher's memories of her busy and often physically distant mother paled before those of the aunt for whom she was named and with whom she maintained a relationship into adulthood.

Aunt Harriet never married. It is possible that other men formed the same estimate of her that Lyman Beecher had when he chose her more tractable sister. She was "an acute and skillful controversialist," and her practice of matching her knowledge of the Episcopal Church's history and doctrines against the theological talents of young Presbyterian ministers would have given pause to fainthearted suitors.¹⁵ It is also possible that this strong-minded woman chose not to marry. She "took the lead in the family" and was much appreciated at Nutplains for her wit, her droll way of telling stories, and her "stock of family tradition and of neighborhood legendary lore." Harriet Beecher remembered visits during which the nieces and nephews were so convulsed over her stories "that they would call for a truce, and request Aunt Harriet to be silent at least long enough for them to drink their tea."¹⁶ No one, including the aged Grandmother Foote, was safe from her crisp and pointed remarks; though couched in humor, they were Aunt Harriet's way of keeping folks in line and letting them know where she stood. She was decisive, principled, an efficient household manager and a strict disciplinarian.

Aunt Harriet instructed the young Harriet Beecher in the useful arts of knitting and sewing and regularly catechized her. "A more energetic human being," Stowe later remarked, "never undertook the education of a child."¹⁷ In the matter of religious instruction, however, Harriet Foote's principles conflicted with her sense of delicacy and propriety. "A vigorous English-woman of the old school," she belonged to the Episcopal Church and accordingly instructed the young Harriet in the church catechism. Although the child showed herself a ready pupil and could soon intone the answers with "old-fashioned gravity and steadiness," Aunt Harriet was troubled by the picture of this daughter of a Congregational minister being led "out of the sphere of [her] birth." Her solution was a victory of energy and discipline: she decided that her charge should learn *two* catechisms, the Presbyterian (the same as the Congregational) *and* the Episcopal. This must have proven too much for both Harriets, for the younger was relieved to hear her aunt

mention privately to Grandmother Foote that "it would be time enough for Harriet to learn the Presbyterian Catechism when she went home."¹⁸

Harriet and Roxana Foote were members of the last generation of New England women who did their own spinning and weaving. Describing a typical day, the nineteen-year-old Roxana wrote to her sister, "I generally rise with the sun" and "after breakfast I generally take my wheel which is my daily companion."¹⁹ Harriet Foote took her spinning and weaving seriously. During a visit to her brother George in New York, she cited as a reason for her to return to Nutplains "that I may see to the weaving of the vast quantities of yarn that I have spun during the past winter."²⁰ These traditional domestic arts, though often tedious, were an important source of self-definition for Harriet and Roxana Foote. Even in their youth, however, the transition to factory production was beginning. This may be seen in a small way in the "spinning-mill" built by their grandfather, Andrew Ward, at the back of his house in Nutplains. "Castle Ward" was situated on the East River, which was navigable by rowboat right up to the Ward property. Here on this brook Andrew Ward built a small spinning mill "furnished with machinery for turning three or four spinning-wheels by water power."²¹ Roxana and her friends gathered in this "favorite spot" to spin, chat, and read. Neither house nor factory, this neighborhood spinning mill bespoke the transition that was in progress.

The War of 1812 gave a boost to American manufactures, and by 1815 the transition from home spinning and weaving to the factory production of cloth was so far advanced as to threaten to displace Harriet Foote's supremacy in this quarter. In the same letter in which she mentioned her desire to return to Nutplains in order to oversee the weaving of the prodigious quantities of yarn she had spun, she noted that her brother John—employed by a commercial house in New York—had insisted that "he shall be able to furnish us with more and better cloth than we can make." A linen company there had spun a large quantity of yarn, and when it was put into the loom the weaver declared it to be "the strongest yarn he ever saw either in Europe or America."²² The sheer quantities that technology made it possible to produce brought the price of cotton yarn down from 92 cents per pound in 1805 to 19 cents in 1845.²³

Harriet Beecher grew up with the new industrial age, reaching her majority during the 1830s, the golden age of the Lowell Mills. Nutplains, however, remained connected to the mercantile and preindustrial past. Except for those employed in a handful of shoemaking shops, the people of Guilford made their livelihoods through agriculture or fishing and seafaring. Sea captains who built their vessels in Guilford often engaged in the lucrative and dangerous West Indies trade.²⁴ It was through this sea commerce that Mary Foote Hubbard came to marry a Jamaican planter and that Roxana Foote learned French from a West Indian émigré. Samuel Foote was directly engaged in this trade, along with travel to more far-flung ports.

In her capacity as family historian and collector of legendary lore, Aunt

Harriet made Nutplains come alive with memories: “There was Aunt Catharine’s embroidery; there Aunt Mary’s paintings and letters; there the things which Uncle Samuel had brought from foreign shores: frankincense from Spain, mats and baskets from Mogadore, and various other trophies locked in drawers, which Aunt Harriet displayed to us on every visit.”²⁵ At Nutplains Roxana Foote was restored to life through the stories that were told about her, the love that was bestowed on her daughter, and the carefully worked objects she had left behind: “We saw her paintings, her needle-work, and heard a thousand little sayings and doings of her daily life.”²⁶ If the children were good, some of the family portraits that Roxana had drawn on ivory would be taken out of places of safekeeping.²⁷

Harriet Beecher Stowe remembered her visits to Nutplains as the “golden hours” of her childhood, and certainly there was rich material there for one of an imaginative temperament. The curtains around her bed were of an Indian linen and printed with “strange mammoth plants,” in the convolutions of which were perched Chinese summer houses and giant birds—a scene brought from foreign shores by Uncle Samuel.²⁸ More than Litchfield, Nutplains was the mythic landscape of childhood where ordinary objects took on magical properties. The countryside surrounding the Foote farmhouse was alive with memory and feeling: “Every juniperbush, every wild sweet-brier, every barren sandy hillside, every stony pasture, spoke of bright hours of love, when we were welcomed back to Nutplains as to our mother’s heart.”²⁹ Some seventy years later Stowe’s memories of Nutplains, aroused by her sister Isabella’s visit there, were still sharp and warm:

I do wish I could have been with you in your pleasant visit at Nutplains, where some of the most joyous days of my childhood were spent All the things that you mentioned I have done over & over again when I was a wild free young girl & never got tired of doing them. The room I slept in for the most part, was the first right hand room as you get to the top of the front stairs. . . .

The room directly facing the head of the stairs was aunt Harriet’s & Grandma’s it had two large comfortable beds for them—I have slept with Aunt Harriet in her bed & enjoyed it as she always kept me so nice & warm

Then there was the colored woman *Dine* was a great friend of mine & we had many frolics & capers together—she told me lots of stories & made herself very entertaining—Then there was the grave yard on Sandy Hill, the other side of the river where I often walked—I wonder if it is there now. It had a nice picket fence all round it then with a gate so I could easily get in & read the inscriptions on the grave-stones.³⁰

Nutplains was the maternal home, and it exercised a powerful tug on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s imagination. Presided over by Aunt Harriet, a woman of “faculty” who could spin and weave as well as challenge fledgling ministers to doctrinal debates, Nutplains was a woman’s place in a pre-industrial age in which women claimed a productive sphere. As the locus for memories of her departed mother, it was an evocative land where memory was embroidered by myth and imagination. In part, the legends passed on

by her aunts and uncles confirmed the image of Roxana as the angel in the house: "Your mother never spoke an angry word in her life. Your mother never told a lie."³¹ But physical objects Roxana had transformed into works of domestic art put Harriet in touch with a different reality: the smooth ivories on whose sensuous surfaces the faces of Aunt Harriet and Grandmother Foote miraculously looked out upon the world, the pieces of fine embroidery whose intricate, tiny stitches expressed a unique sense of design, fabric, texture, and color, as well as an art "which had almost passed out of memory"—these tangible remains made palpable the fingers of a woman artist.³²

Out of this mixture of myth and sympathetic magic, Stowe on the one hand created a literary mother and on the other hand imagined a domestic landscape instinct with maternal love. Both appear in her novels, the former as a liability and the latter as a rich reservoir of vision and feeling. "Saint" Roxana was a secondhand creation that perhaps was as emotionally unconvincing to Harriet Beecher Stowe as St. Clare's dying exclamation, "Mother!," is to modern readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By contrast, Harriet Beecher Stowe's roomy New England kitchens, with their wide fireplaces, ample settles, faultless loaves of cake, and familiar conversation embody the ethos of a women's culture that was her mother's richest heritage to her. Located in a preindustrial world in which shadows fell picturesquely on the bare boards of a country kitchen, Stowe's love affair with the New England past was in some sense a literary transformation of her love affair with a distant mother. Just as significantly, Stowe created in her fiction a large panorama of mother surrogates who in their combination of realism and feeling are among her most interesting characters. Modeled on real-life women like Aunt Harriet and Grandma Foote, who warmed her with affectionate arms and taught her wayward and dreamy spirit to trace the neat cross-stitches of a New England daughter's education, these are the Aunt Ophelias and Miss Mehitabels and Widow Scudders of her fiction. Women without men—independent women—these mother surrogates provided an alternative model of womanhood more congenial to the needs of a woman artist than that of the saintly Roxana.

CHAPTER THREE



Litchfield: 1816–1824

Harriet described the parsonage in Litchfield as “a wide, roomy, windy edifice that seemed to have been built by a succession of after-thoughts.”¹ This rambling affair in which kitchen gave rise to sink-room and sink-room to wood-house and wood-house to carriage house in “a gradually lessening succession of out-buildings” provided during the long Litchfield winters an interior landscape in which the large Beecher household distributed itself. Harriet’s favorite rooms were the kitchen and her father’s study, both of which enfolded her in a welcome sociability. As she says of Dolly in *Poganuc People*, she had the misfortune “to enter the family at a period when babies were no longer a novelty, when the house was full of the wants and clamors of older children, and the mother at her very wits’ end with a confusion of jackets and trowsers, soap, candles and groceries, and the endless harassments of making both ends meet which pertain to the lot of a poor country minister’s wife” (PP, 8). Harriet was trained with a military precision to come when called, to do as she was told, to speak only when spoken to. As long as she was healthy, clothed, and fed, her caretakers assumed that all of her earthly wants were satisfied; listening to her questions, musings, and small childhood tragedies was a luxury for which they had no time. For sociability Harriet turned either to the books in her father’s study or to the society of the kitchen help.

In the kitchen she found black servants and white hired girls who, being “in the same situation of repressed communicativeness, encouraged her conversational powers” (PP, 8). She may have remembered Zillah and Rachel

Crooke, who followed the Beechers from East Hampton to Litchfield to finish their indentures. Catharine Beecher described Zillah as “the smartest black woman I ever knew.” Harriet recalled a black woman named Candace, hired to help out with the mountain of laundry generated by the Litchfield household. The terms in which she remembered Candace suggest that for Harriet the kitchen was a place of emotional expressiveness. Soon after the death of Roxana Beecher, while the family prayer service proceeded in the next room, Candace drew Harriet aside in the kitchen and, Harriet remembered, “held me quite still till the exercises were over, and then she kissed my hand, and I felt her tears drop upon it. There was something about her feeling that struck me with awe. She scarcely spoke a word, but gave me to understand that she was paying that homage to my mother’s memory.”² Candace joined in the eulogies to Roxana’s “saintly virtues,” but what struck the young child most forcibly was the direct physical expression of her feelings.

While her visits in the kitchen encouraged free expression, her ruminations in her father’s study, located at the very top of the house in the third garret, gave flight to her imagination. Seated in a corner of this arched room, surrounded by the “friendly, quiet faces of books,” she felt both sheltered and free. The presence of her father seated at his desk, mumbling over the preparation of a sermon she could not understand, represented the adult world that simultaneously protected her and excluded her from its mysteries. The questions that no one except the kitchen help had time for, only telling her that she would understand these things well enough when she was grown up, sent her to books for companionship and answers—but even here she was met with a bewildering array of adult titles: Bell’s *Sermons*, Bogue’s *Essays*, Bonnet’s *Inquiries*, Horsley’s *Tracts*. But when the bottom of a barrel of old sermons yielded up the hidden treasure of an intact copy of *Arabian Nights*, she discovered reading as a radical liberation:

The “Arabian Nights” transported her to foreign lands, gave her a new life of her own; and when things went astray with her, when the boys went to play higher than she dared to climb in the barn, or started on fishing excursions, where they considered her an encumbrance, then she found a snug corner, where, curled up in a little, quiet lair, she could at once sail forth on her bit of enchanted carpet into fairy-land. (PP, 121)

Harriet’s reminiscences of her youth are peppered with envy of her older brothers, from whose activities she was regularly excluded on the grounds of both age and sex. In Litchfield, her brother Charles remembered her “coming in with a six quart pail full of berries, and her dress wet up to her knees.”³ Harriet remembered how she, “sole little girl among so many boys,” helped to chop wood.

How the axes rung, and the chips flew, and the jokes and stories flew faster; and when all was cut and split, then came the great work of wheeling in and piling; and then I, sole little girl among so many boys, was sucked into the

vortex of enthusiasm by father's well-pointed declaration that he "wished Harriet was a boy, she would do more than any of them."

I remember putting on a little black coat which I thought looked more like the boys, casting needle and thread to the wind, and working almost like one possessed for a day and a half, till in the afternoon the wood was all in and piled, and the chips swept up.⁴

These outdoor exploits were clearly a way of gaining her father's coveted attention. Catharine, the eldest, enjoyed Lyman Beecher's companionship, but to Harriet her father was an idolized but distant figure.

While her brothers were treated to a fishing expedition at Pine Island with Lyman Beecher, she was likely to be assigned the task of sewing a long, straight seam on a sheet.⁵ In *Poganuc People* Dolly's brothers go off to the Fourth of July celebration—a male affair in which mock battles generate great clouds of gunsmoke and noise—while Dolly sits at home manufacturing a great pool of tears, envying "the happy boys who might some day grow up and fight for their country, and do something glorious like General Washington" (PP, 134). Dolly's brothers were not above displaying their superiority; educated at the Academy, they came home spouting Latin phrases, sometimes deliberately displaying them to confound her. "There also were the boys' cabinets of mineralogical specimens; for the Academy teacher was strong on geology, and took his boys on long tramps with stone-hammers on their shoulders, and they used to discuss with great unction to Dolly of tourmaline and hornblende and mica and quartz and feldspar, delighted to exhibit before her their scientific superiority" (PP, 119). Surrounded by older people, Harriet grew up burning with ambition to enter the adult world with a flash of glory. She turned to books for solace and reward; in both a figurative and literal sense, they did finally enable her to climb higher than her brothers.

She was constantly on the prowl for reading matter which, though in plentiful supply in the Beecher household, was likely to be somewhat daunting; titles such as "Toplady on Predestination" stood out in the welter of sermons, essays, replies, and rejoinders that were the meat and drink of Lyman Beecher's combative ministry. He considered novels "trash" and did not allow them in the house. Harriet fed her taste for the imaginative by memorizing the Song of Solomon and reading lurid tales of the anticlericalism of the French Revolution. She recalled finding in a pile of religious pamphlets a dismembered section of *Don Quixote* "rising . . . [like] an enchanted island out of an ocean of mud." An even greater discovery was Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. His tales of her native land inspired her just as they did her contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne. They were early examples of a Euro-American literature that drew on indigenous materials: here were Indians, witchcraft, the sayings and doings of everyday life—but mixed in with a high and holy purpose which made it permissible to be entertained by them.⁶

Novel reading was viewed in an entirely different light, however, by the

Foote family, and the Beecher household at Litchfield was not impervious to this influence. Catharine vividly recalled the visits of Uncle Samuel Foote, who was one of the most important intellectual influences on Harriet Beecher:⁷ “After we moved to Litchfield, Uncle Samuel came among us, on his return from each voyage, as a sort of brilliant genius of another sphere, bringing gifts and wonders that seemed to wake new faculties in all.” Captain of a his own vessel by age twenty, Samuel Foote had sailed all over the world. He brought to Litchfield not only Oriental caps and Moorish slippers, but appreciation of the diversity of cross-cultural customs and beliefs. He delighted in challenging Lyman Beecher’s evangelical single-mindedness by exhibiting uncomfortably broad knowledge. “I remember long discussions,” wrote Catharine, “in which he maintained that the Turks were more honest than Christians, bringing very startling facts in evidence.” He defended the piety and learning of the Catholics in Spain and the heroic martyrdom of the Jews in Morocco. “The new fields of vision presented by my uncle, the skill and adroitness of his arguments, the array of his facts, combined to tax father’s powers to their utmost.”⁸

Samuel Foote also brought new voices to the literary circles of Litchfield, where he was viewed as “a sort of hero of romance” by the young women. He was fluent in French and he spoke Spanish with a flawless Castillian accent. It was through his agency, and that of Aunt Mary Hubbard, that novel reading was introduced into the evangelical household of Lyman Beecher. They always appeared with stacks of the latest romantic literature: the novels of Scott and the poetry of Byron and Moore were read and reread aloud to eager family gatherings. Faced with this domestic mutiny, Lyman Beecher made what at first may have been a tactical concession to an irresistible cultural force, but that later became an acquired taste of his own. Harriet remembered the day that Lyman Beecher spoke *ex cathedra*: “George,” he declared, “you may read Scott’s novels. I have always disapproved of novels as trash, but in these is real genius and real culture, and you may read them.”⁹ And read them they did, *Ivanhoe* seven times over, until much of it was committed to memory.

Sir Walter Scott became a Beecher family institution. Catharine wrote romantic ballads after his style, and with her friend Louisa Wait at the piano the parsonage “rang with Scottish ballads.”¹⁰ When the Beechers sat around the kitchen peeling apples for the cider apple sauce that would be frozen and cut in slices for use on the table in winter, they passed the time by seeing who could recall the most of incident and passage from Scott’s novels.¹¹ As Harriet wrote in *Poganuc People*, “The young folks called the rocks and glens and rivers of their romantic region by names borrowed from Scott; they clambered among the crags of Benvenue and sailed on the bosom of Loch Katrine” (PP, 91). When Harriet had a household of her own it contained a “Walter Scott bookcase,” and when she traveled to Scotland she made a point of visiting all the places whose names had invested the haunts of her childhood with a mysterious, romantic aura.¹²

Neither was Lyman Beecher immune to the appeal of romanticism. He followed with great interest the career of Lord Byron, though he covered his attraction by imagining himself Byron's evangelical savior. He did not attempt to hide his admiration for Napoleon. "Genius and heroism," Harriet remembered, "would move him even to tears." The courage and fortitude of Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* inspired him to read aloud the description of his marshalling his troops after his fall from heaven with such evident sympathy that Harriet was quite enlisted in Satan's favor. When he reached the passage, "Thrice he essay'd, and thrice, in spite of scorn, / Tears, such as angels weep, burst forth," he burst into tears himself.¹³ Harriet loved these stories as much for their drama as for their religious sentiment, and not a small part of her hero worship was childhood's dream of ambition. Her first poetic attempt was an overwrought narrative called "Cleon," set in Rome during Nero's persecutions of the Christians. No doubt she was sure that *she* would have stood up to the emperor.

Lyman Beecher believed that there were two kinds of armor his children needed for the battle with the principalities and powers. The first was polemical skill. One of Harriet's most characteristic images of her father is a picture of him, apple peeler in hand, encouraging theological debate among the assembled apple peelers. He would deliberately take the wrong side of a question and spar with his sons. If they did not score a direct enough hit, he would stop and explain, "The argument lies so, my son; do that, and you'll trip me up."¹⁴ Later victorious in two heresy trials, Lyman trained his sons for a litigious ministry that was sport, spice, and salvation all rolled in one. Speaking of his expertise in the ecclesiastical councils of Litchfield, he said, "I became quite a lawyer. Never succeeded better any where than in ecclesiastical courts."¹⁵ In fact, he relished these battles. To Harriet, her father's heroism in battle was no less moving than Satan's: ["H]is name was 'Turn to the Right Thwack Away'— & thwack away he did lustily & with good courage."¹⁶

An even more essential armor than polemical skill was the experience of rebirth in Jesus Christ. A conversion experience was the capstone of a Beecher family education, an "anchor to the soul" without which it was foolish to "mingle with the world." A recently converted Edward Beecher chided Catharine for her neglect of this principle: "Do you think of going to Boston before you become a christian? It must not be—How can you think of it. The harvest may be passed for ever."¹⁷ It was a source of considerable torment to Lyman Beecher that he could lead successful revivals in Litchfield, but he could not bring his own children to Christ. He continually told his children that his greatest anxiety was the state of their unconverted souls, and that the greatest happiness would be his when he heard the news that they had submitted to Jesus Christ. Under this weight of constant parental scrutiny many of the Beecher children experienced total paralysis of their spiritual faculties and delayed the crisis until well into adulthood. This only redoubled the watchings and warnings. Every Saturday Lyman Beecher held

meetings with the students at the Litchfield Female Academy where student Caroline Boardman recorded his apocalyptic warnings: ["T]here were five who attended this school formerly that were now deprived of their reason, five who had become intemperate and two died every year."¹⁸ While his graphic powers of description and his vivid portrayals of the tortures of hell spread his success as a revival preacher, at home his children remained "all stupid."¹⁹

After Roxana's death Esther Beecher, Lyman's half-sister, assumed the charge of the Beecher children out of sympathy with their motherless state, and in a spirit of duty and self-abnegation. Like Harriet Foote, Aunt Esther never married, but unlike Harriet Foote Esther had been an only child raised under the dark, critical eye of a mother whose neat and orderly house represented the horizon of her world. Yet Aunt Esther possessed formidable skills in the line of reading, writing, and the marshalling of ideas. Her inventiveness no less than her patience is suggested by the exclamation of a Beecher child who, during convalescence from an illness, was heard to say, "Only think! Aunt Esther has told me *nineteen rat stories* all in a string." (The old parsonage was so riddled with rats that even the cats ignored them.) Harriet believed Aunt Esther knew the sum of knowledge in the world, for never did she fail to answer a question put to her. "She had read on all subjects—chemistry, philosophy, physiology, but especially on natural history, where her anecdotes were inexhaustible."²⁰ A sermon that satisfied Aunt Esther represented to Lyman Beecher "the highest state of excellence in writing to which I ever aspire."²¹ Her neat and shady parlor overhung by inviting bookshelves was one of Harriet's favorite retreats.²²

The Beechers considered Aunt Esther "the peaceable fruits of righteousness"—the compensation and comfort that had grown out of their loss of Roxana.²³ She was loyal to the Beechers in all their vagaries and schemes. She worried over their debts and darned their socks. She followed the Beecher children to Hartford and then Cincinnati, and circulated among them after they were dispersed to points across the Western Reserve. When there was sickness or domestic need, Aunt Esther soon appeared. As adults, the Beecher children vied for her time, begging for a visit from Aunt Esther, that she might ease the domestic difficulties of their household with her calm and self-denying presence. In the epochs of the three successive Mrs. Beechers, Aunt Esther was a constant; the family memory and the chronicler, she was the one to whom the Beechers turned with questions about their childhood histories.²⁴ When she died, Harriet Beecher asked if she could have her work basket to remember her by.

Another of the "peaceable fruits" of Roxana's death was the spirit of independence and family competence that the children necessarily developed. As the oldest of the household of eight children, Catharine felt the mantle of responsibility descend on her shoulders. At sixteen, she became mother to her brothers and sisters. As she measured and cut the clothes for them—a task that perplexed Aunt Esther—she not only experienced the

pride of accomplishment, she provided the cornerstone of a peer culture in which the Beecher children cared for one another. The extraordinary family loyalty of the Beechers was a deep reservoir of emotional and intellectual support upon which they all made large draughts during their ambitious and far-flung careers. "Remember that we shall never regret that we acted like brothers & sisters," Edward wrote to Catharine around this time.²⁵ When Harriet was eighteen she wrote, "I love to hear sisters speak of their brothers. There is no pride I can so readily tolerate as pride of relationship."²⁶ The ability of the Beecher children to rally around one another was strengthened in the difficult year after Roxana's death. As one of the younger children raised by elder siblings, Harriet Beecher was particularly susceptible to this peer culture; when she was twelve, her father was nearing fifty and beginning, as he said, "to look back and lean on [my children] as once I looked up for support to those of the generation which is gone."²⁷

In the fall of 1817 Lyman Beecher brought home his second wife. In terms of intellect and socialization, Harriet Porter was significantly like her predecessor. She was a woman of "vigorous and cultivated intellect" and her uncles were the governors, bishops, and congressmen of Maine. Moreover, she was well adapted to the job of domestic support for a ministerial husband. She wrote a few months after their marriage, "When I think what he is, and what he is doing in his study above, it helps in the discharge of duty below."²⁸ Catharine formally welcomed her stepmother into what had been her sphere of responsibility, but Harriet Porter remained an outsider to the Beecher children from Lyman's first marriage. Harriet remembered being in awe of this beautiful and delicate lady, who seemed a storybook princess: "I remember I used to feel breezy, and rough, and rude in her presence."²⁹

Not intimately involved in the care of the Beecher children, Harriet Porter nevertheless appreciated their intellectual appetites. Soon after her arrival she described their prospects in a letter to her sister:

It seems the highest happiness of the children (the larger ones especially) to have a reading circle. They have all, I think, fine capacities, and a good taste for learning. Edward, probably, will be a great scholar. . . . Catharine is a fine-looking girl, and in her mind I find all that I expected. She is not handsome, yet there is hardly any one who appears better. Mary will make a fine woman, I think; will be rather handsome than otherwise. She is twelve now, large of her age, and is almost the most useful member of the family. The four youngest are very pretty. George comes next to Mary. He is quite a large boy; takes care of the cow, etc.; goes to school, though his father expects to educate him. He learns well.

Harriet and Henry come next, and they are always hand-in-hand. They are as lovely children as I ever saw, amiable, affectionate, and very bright. Charles, the youngest, we can hardly tell what he will be, but he promises well.³⁰

The two oldest boys, Edward and William, soon left for college. The other children were completely under the care of Catharine and Mary morning and night and were away at school during the day. Harriet Porter's energies

were soon taken up by children of her own; in 1818 she gave birth to the first of her four children, who would arrive in this order: Frederick, Isabella, Thomas, James.

Harriet Beecher had the good fortune to grow up in Litchfield at the height of its golden age. By becoming a supply depot during the Revolutionary War, Litchfield had developed commercial arteries to Boston and New York. In the decades following independence commercial development boomed. Litchfield was the county seat, and the regular court sessions held there added a population of lawyers to the merchants who had set up stores. A prosperous professional elite made Litchfield appealing to people of taste and intellect. The Rev. Dan Huntington, pastor of Litchfield from 1798 to 1809, described the town as he found it: "A delightful village, on a fruitful hill, richly endowed with schools both professional and scientific, with its venerable governors and judges, with its learned lawyers, and senators, and representatives both in the national and state departments, and with a population enlightened and respectable, Litchfield was now in its glory."³¹

Litchfield responded quickly to the changed manners that came with independence. In colonial times no theatricals were ever held in Litchfield, but after the war and the founding of the law school, "the infusion of a new spirit was so strong" that theatricals immediately sprung up.³² Revolutionary thinking extended to women's rights and responsibilities in the new republic. Judge Tapping Reeve, a leading Litchfield citizen and intimate of Lyman Beecher, wrote a treatise on domestic relations that was thought to lean "too much to women's rights" to be considered law. He and other like-minded men of vision put up the subscription that enabled Sarah Pierce to build her female academy, for in republican America the intellects of its women were resources to be cultivated in the interests of rearing intelligent sons and daughters of liberty.³³

In an address to Miss Pierce's class of 1816, teacher John Brace reminded the students of the privilege they enjoyed by living in an age distinguished by "the general diffusion of knowledge." He observed that education was "no longer restricted to our sex," but "shines equally upon both with the same rays and the same effects." Contrasting the present age with "the night of ignorance" that preceded it, he credited education with improving women's "rank in society, placing her as the rational companion of man, not the slave of his pleasures or the victim of tyranny."³⁴ Making allowances for his republican rhetoric, he was not exaggerating. Only about half of all New England women could sign their names in 1780, and probably many of these could not read. By 1840, however, literacy in New England was virtually universal.³⁵ Improvements in women's education, as one historian has observed, "form[ed] the basis of all the other major role changes experienced by women in the later nineteenth century."³⁶

The story of Sarah Pierce's school, which the Beecher children attended gratis in exchange for their father's pastoral services, was itself a parable of the times. When their father died at the early age of fifty-three, Sarah

Pierce's brother, who had had a distinguished career in the Continental Army under George Washington, encouraged her to prepare herself to run a school. Although the talents he expected her to develop were more social than intellectual, the school she began in her Litchfield dining room in 1792 reflected the new cultivation of women's minds as well as the older, more aristocratic attention to women's accomplishments.³⁷ Her educational goal was to teach the art of thinking, her larger purpose, to "vindicate the equality of female intellect." While in step with the republican spirit of the times, this was, as Mary Beth Norton has observed, a radical philosophy.³⁸ In 1798 Miss Pierce moved her school into the building erected by the subscriptions of the town's prominent citizens, and this inaugurated the most successful period of the academy's history; during the next three decades the school enjoyed a national reputation and enrollments of as many as 140 students per session. One of the first female academies in the new nation, Miss Pierce's school attracted students from all over New England and from as far away as New York, Ohio, Canada, and the West Indies. The girls boarded with local families and abided by rules which remind us that while their minds were schooled in republican principles, their behavior was regulated by the canons of true womanhood: "You must suppress all emotions of anger, fretfulness and discontent," they were warned.³⁹

Although not immune to evangelical earnestness, the school had a decidedly eighteenth-century tone. In his address to the class of 1816, John Brace told the students that the school had endeavored "to teach you to feel but to feel in subordination to reason."⁴⁰ His personal library included works by Bunyan, Dryden, and Colley Cibber, as well as volumes of Addison and Steele's *The Spectator* and Fielding's *Tom Jones*.⁴¹ The English classics were a favorite point of reference for both John Brace and Sarah Pierce, and the latter interspersed her daily counsels with quotations from them. Catharine Beecher recalled that "[e]ven the rules of the school, read aloud every Saturday, were rounded off in Johnsonian periods, which the roguish girls sometimes would most irreverently burlesque."⁴²

John Brace, who had a significant influence both on the school and on the education of Harriet Beecher, was himself something of an eighteenth-century man. Possessed, as Harriet recalled, "of the most general information on *all subjects*,"⁴³ Brace had interests that ranged from heraldry to astrology; a poet and novelist, he became editor of the *Hartford Courant* after he retired from teaching. He was Sarah Pierce's nephew and was educated at Williams College for the express purpose of becoming her assistant. He became head teacher in 1814 and inaugurated important curricular expansions. An accomplished naturalist, he was in correspondence with learned men in England, Sweden, and Switzerland; Harriet remembered that his example inspired the boys (girls were apparently not included in rockhounding expeditions) to tramp over hill and dale in search of minerals to set up in their collections.⁴⁴

Although Miss Pierce normally did not accept students until they were

twelve years old, Harriet Beecher entered in 1819 at age eight.⁴⁵ Endowed with a "remarkably retentive memory," she had attended private primary schools since the age of six where she had learned to read fluently and had memorized twenty-seven hymns and two chapters of the Bible.⁴⁶ Miss Pierce's school, located one block from the Beecher family parsonage on North Street, was one large room, about seventy by thirty feet in size, containing an elevated teacher's chair, a piano, and small closets for cloaks and caps. Students sat on long, hard, pine benches without backs and wrote on plain pine desks.⁴⁷ The year Harriet entered, John Brace observed that the student body was "not as large as usual," about ninety-five scholars. Harriet had been preceded by her older siblings Catharine, Mary, and George (a few boys' names appear in the class lists of the Litchfield Female Academy); Henry and Charles were enrolled in 1823, the year before she left.⁴⁸

Harriet's education was significantly different from that of Catharine, who attended the school when Miss Pierce was the sole teacher. "At that time," Catharine recalled, "'the higher branches' had not entered the female schools. Map-drawing, painting, embroidery and the piano were the accomplishments sought, and history was the only study added to geography, grammar, and arithmetic."⁴⁹ With the arrival of John Brace, the curriculum at the Litchfield Female Academy resembled more nearly that of a boys' academy. He added higher mathematics, the sciences, moral philosophy, logic, and an occasional Latin tutorial.⁵⁰ The courses of study required for a degree in Harriet's time included "Morse's Geography, Webster's Elements of English Grammar, Miss Pierce's History, Arithmetic through Interest, Blair's Lectures, Modern Europe, Ramsey's American Revolution, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Paley's Moral Philosophy, Hedge's Logic and Addison [that is, Alison] on Taste."⁵¹

The inclusion of moral philosophy in the curriculum of the Litchfield Female Academy is evidence of the high intellectual aspirations of this pioneering school. It was not taught in the boys' academies because it was assumed that preparatory students would experience it in college, where, indeed, moral philosophy formed the capstone of their senior year. Paley's *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), used at the Litchfield Female Academy, was the text most widely used in American colleges into the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In general the teaching of moral philosophy painted an eighteenth-century universe in which "[i]t was discovered that religious conviction and Christian ethics rested not only upon the word of God but upon the verification which man's reason found in nature."⁵²

Harriet Beecher described John Brace as "one of the most stimulating and inspiring instructors I ever knew."⁵³ Although his work in the natural sciences was perhaps his most notable accomplishment, Harriet remembered his skill in moral philosophy and composition.⁵⁴ His approach to composition was at once progressive and rooted in eighteenth-century aesthetic principles. Believing that the first impulse to expression was the conviction

that one had something of worth to say, he stimulated discussion on a wide variety of topics, and it was these debates that Harriet remembered most vividly in later years.⁵⁵ At the same time he encouraged the reading of the English classics to form his students' taste; Harriet Beecher followed his lead when she later prepared to teach composition at the Hartford Female Seminary.⁵⁶ A surprising amount of the organized reading at the Litchfield Female Academy was of novels, including Maria Edgeworth's *The Unknown Friend*, which Miss Pierce read aloud to the school in 1814.⁵⁷

One of the youngest scholars, Harriet Beecher lost no time in proving her readiness to enter the grown-up world of the academy. Writing regular compositions was a staple of John Brace's educational regimen, and when she was only nine Harriet volunteered to write every week. The difference between Sarah Pierce and John Brace is illustrated in the topics they assigned for composition. Drawing almost exclusively from the British advice literature on the proper education of women, Sarah Pierce assigned essays on such topics as "Contentment," "Cheerfulness," "Charity," "Forgiveness," and other female virtues.⁵⁸ John Brace's first assignment to Harriet was an essay on "The Difference between the Natural and Moral Sublime"—a topic, Harriet noted, "not trashy or sentimental, such as are often supposed to be the style for female schools." The misspelled composition she handed in was a tribute to her ambition and to the excitement of John Brace's teaching. After two years of his tutelage in composition Harriet Beecher was selected to be one of the writers for the academy's annual exhibition. The topic, "Can the immortality of the soul be proved by the light of nature?," was calculated to call forth the best in the pupil of John Brace and the daughter of Lyman Beecher. She argued the negative. When at the exhibition the composition was read aloud "before all the literati of Litchfield," her father was sitting on high next to John Brace. She noticed that Lyman Beecher "brightened and looked interested" while her composition was being read, and at the conclusion she heard him ask Brace who wrote it. When the answer came, "'Your daughter, sir!,'" Harriet experienced "the proudest moment" of her life: "There was no mistaking father's face when he was pleased, and to have interested *him* was past all juvenile triumphs."⁵⁹

In spite of this precocious essay, Harriet was not a consistent student. John Brace organized the school along military lines and encouraged a fierce competition among the different divisions, each headed by a "lieutenant."⁶⁰ In addition, Sarah Pierce "publicly rank[ed] students each week into a complex system of credit and debit marks and award[ed] coveted awards and prizes at the end of each school term."⁶¹ It was Mary Beecher, the only child of Lyman Beecher to have no public career, who regularly won prizes and the privilege of being "head of papers."⁶² Harriet excelled when her interests were engaged, but did not have the discipline and regularity of the prizewinning student. She had no mind for arithmetic and remarked in later years that "when I was a girl I thought I could not even make change in a store."⁶³ When she should have been applying herself to her lessons, she was listening

to the recitations of the older children. "Much of the training and inspiration of my early days consisted, not in the things which I was supposed to be studying, but in hearing, while seated unnoticed at my desk, the conversation of Mr. Brace with the older classes." As she listened "from hour to hour" with "eager ears," she absorbed precocious intellectual frameworks, a love of ideas and expression, and a desire to excel in the handling of them.⁶⁴

The influence John Brace exercised by virtue of his engaging and intelligent teaching was enhanced by the fact that in 1819 he married Lucy Porter, sister of Lyman Beecher's second wife, and lived for a time in the Beecher parsonage. As Catharine reported in a letter to her Uncle Samuel, "[Lucy] is a lovely girl about my age & has spent the winter here.—She will be married next fall to Mr. John Brace & will settle here which will be a great comfort to mama & all of us."⁶⁵ Two years later Brace and his wife were still boarding at the Beechers.⁶⁶ Thus Harriet had ample opportunity to observe her mentor in the parlor, where he cut quite a literary figure. "The poetical compositions of this gentleman," recalled Harriet, "were constantly circulating among the young ladies of his school and the literati of the place, and there was a peculiar freshness of enjoyment and excitement to us in this species of native unpublished literature." She remembered in particular the vogue for "ballads and poetical effusions" on the subject of the Bantam Indians who had lived in Litchfield.⁶⁷ In the summer of 1821 John Brace initiated a newspaper at the Litchfield Female Academy. It was called the "Holy-day Recorder" because it was read on Wednesdays, a holiday when students came to the school but no classes were held—the most interesting day of the week for many students. "Very many of the students wrote for it, as I did myself," Brace noted, "and it was very interesting." It is likely that Harriet Beecher, an eager writer in what Brace called this "literary loving school," participated in this venture, though no copies of the newspaper exist to confirm this supposition. Brace pointed out that this newspaper was the model for the one that Catharine later began at her Hartford Female Seminary, though she gave him no credit.⁶⁸

Miss Pierce was a firm believer in the benefits of exercise and required her students to take morning and evening walks. Other forms of exercise included bowling on the green with young men from the law school, jumping rope, and swinging on swings.⁶⁹ Groups of young women strolling to such destinations as Chestnut Hill, Bantam Lake, and Prospect Hill would often be joined by young men from the law school. Many courtships were begun and pursued during evening strolls, and more than fifty marriages issued between women from the Litchfield Female Academy and men from the Litchfield Law School. Indeed, placing one's daughter in a position to marry well was one reason parents went to great trouble and expense to transport them to Litchfield. In the early republic, social life in Litchfield was relaxed and inclusive of all ages. Even children as young as eleven went to the balls. By the time Harriet entered school, however, Miss Pierce's rules stipulated that only girls sixteen and older might attend the balls.⁷⁰

Although Harriet Beecher lived at home while she attended the Litch-

field Female Academy, the Beecher parsonage was if anything more like a school boardinghouse than even Miss Pierce's home. In addition to the head teacher, John Brace, boarders included Louisa Wait, the music instructor, who lived with the Beechers for many years and became a close friend of Catharine, plus many student boarders attending the Litchfield Female Academy or Tapping Reeve's Litchfield Law School. During the winters a Russian stove heated three rooms down and three rooms up, drawing all inhabitants to the comparative warmth of these quarters. A large parlor had been added to the front of the house, but company always sat in "the little front room," which was warm.⁷¹ The rich social life of the Beecher parsonage cramped their quarters but broadened their horizons. As Lynne Brickley has written, "The boarders served an important educational function in Litchfield's families, mingling the thoughts, habits and customs of places as different and distant as New York City, Savannah, Georgia, Middlebury, Vermont, Ohio and Canada. In a time of limited travel and communication, the boarding system broadened the townfolks' exposure to national rather than to local customs, tastes and ideas."⁷²

Harriet Beecher was born in an enlightened republican age and received the best education available to women at that time. Her first education was informal, and took place in the kitchen and common room and library of the Beecher household. Her second was formal, and proceeded most notably under the auspices of Sarah Pierce's nationally renowned school. In both, it is striking that Harriet's most important lessons were not taught but overheard: Lyman Beecher's instructions to his sons on the art of debate, John Brace's conversations with the older children.

As a young girl, however, this heightened attentiveness often made her appear "odd." Imbued with a strong desire to please, she did not readily fall into ways of winning approval. It was easier to gain attention by making "wry faces" and exciting laughter than by adhering to the forms of proper girlhood.⁷³ In the winter of 1822 when the Beechers were struggling under the combined difficulties of Lyman's breakdown from overwork and Harriet Porter's approaching confinement with her second child, Harriet was sent to Nutplains. When Catharine wrote to her to announce the birth of Isabella, she told her, "We all want you home very much, but hope you are now where you will learn to stand and sit straight, and hear what people say to you, and sit still in your chair, and learn to sew and knit well, and be a good girl in every particular; and if you don't learn while you are with Aunt Harriet, I am afraid you never will."⁷⁴

Lyman Beecher recognized the oddity of his daughter as the mark of "genius" in conflict with gender. His observations about Harriet in a letter to his brother-in-law stand out by contrast with the more ordinary remarks he offers about his other children:

William is doing well in his clerkship at New Milford & now supports himself. Catherine is learning to play on the Piano with the intention of teaching Miss Pierces School & helping herself—Mary [hole in page] to be the best scholar in Miss Pierces school & at home does all the *chores*. Harriet is a great genius—

I would give a hundred dollars if she was a boy & Henry a girl—She is as odd—as she is intelligent & studious—Henry is Henry—grown older & learning some bad things from bad boys—but on the whole a lovely child—Charles is as intellegent as ever & falls down 20 times a day—he will doubtless be a great man.⁷⁵

For all of the limitations of this response, Lyman Beecher's appreciation of Harriet and his accessibility as a role model positioned her to overhear what she needed to learn in order to find a channel of expression for both her genius and her gender. In addition, she was exposed through the Litchfield Female Academy and the contrasting cultures of Nutplains and Litchfield to the pluralism of the new republic. Even before she left Connecticut, she had had a more national experience than most of her contemporaries.

The completion of Harriet's Litchfield education came in the summer of 1825, when she reported to her father that Christ had taken her for his own. Her imaginative temperament spared her the paralyzing doubts that posed an obstacle to more strict and legalistic minds. Her conversion came gently, naturally, in the afterglow of an inspiring sermon by her father. She was thirteen years old.⁷⁶

CHAPTER FOUR



The Hartford Female Seminary: 1824–1827

On September 3, 1824, the city of Hartford turned out to welcome General Lafayette, who two weeks earlier had begun his triumphal tour of America. Revered for his heroism at Yorktown and his willingness to share the deprivations of the common soldier at Valley Forge, Lafayette turned Americans inside out in a frenzy of republican pride. Babies were named for him and held up at the processions that greeted him from New York to Washington, D.C. His visit was “an entrepreneur’s delight.”¹ In Hartford “triumphal arches were erected at the foot of Morgan Street and on the west side of the State House.” The normally somber banks and commercial buildings were festooned with flowers and evergreens. Throughout the city citizens illuminated their houses in tribute to the Revolutionary War hero. In this city of seven thousand, eight hundred young schoolchildren marched in procession, the girls in white dresses pinned with ribbons that read “Nous vous aimons, La Fayette” (“We love you, La Fayette”).² At the State House the governor’s address welcomed Lafayette to Connecticut, “where a virtuous and enlightened people have, during nearly two centuries, enjoyed Republican Institutions.”³

Some time during this week thirteen-year-old Harriet Beecher made her unobtrusive entry into the same city with her carpetbag stuffed with all her worldly goods. It is fitting that she made her entrance into Hartford at the same time as Lafayette, for she was embarking on a republican experiment in women’s education. Catharine Beecher’s Hartford Female Seminary, bravely begun in the spring of 1823 with seven students in a single room

above the White Horse harness shop, was destined to take a significant place in the history of the education of women. Moreover, it sprang from Catharine's awareness of the contradiction between republican principles and the still-backward state of female education. In its prime the seminary boasted more than 160 students, eight teachers, two principals, and a governess—all of whom were female. Run by and for women, the Hartford Female Seminary provided a separate institution in which young women aged twelve and up could explore for themselves the meaning of republican sisterhood. From dawn until dusk they studied together, prayed, incited and quelled food rebellions, talked, sewed, and exchanged a welter of notes—notes of friendship, of personal distress, of religious concern. The seminary provided an all-female institution within the larger culture, a space within which young women could, for perhaps the first time in their lives, articulate a culture that spoke directly to and from their experience. Under Catharine's leadership, it became a testing ground for women's "moral influence." It provided Harriet Beecher's first lectern and pulpit, an opportunity to test her power to influence others. Here, in the winter of 1829, the students and the teachers engaged in a radical experiment in republican government. In this women's culture Harriet Beecher tentatively tried out her vocations of teacher, preacher, and writer. Harriet's eight years in the Hartford Female Seminary took her through the formative period of adolescence: when she emerged she was twenty-one. Although her career took a different path from Catharine's, it was profoundly shaped by her elder sister, who adroitly turned her own experience into practical experiments for the benefit of others.

When, in 1822, the expected course of her life was dramatically altered by the death of her fiancé, Alexander Fisher, Catharine Beecher experienced a rude awakening. She had had no preparation for the independent life she now found thrust upon her. She had attended Miss Pierce's Female Academy when the emphasis was on social rather than intellectual attainments. In addition, Catharine had beguiled her mentors with her charm and high spirits, thus avoiding confrontation with strenuous thought. She admitted in a letter to her father in 1822 that whatever knowledge she possessed had "walked into her head."⁴ In the year following Fisher's death she set about remedying the deficiencies of what she termed a "domestic education"; she learned the rudiments of geometry, chemistry, geography, and moral philosophy with a view to defining an independent life for herself and teaching an improved curriculum. As she later wrote, "The most remarkable case of the culture of undeveloped or deficient intellectual faculties, in the Hartford Seminary, was my own."⁵

Catharine's educational mission began within the Beecher family. Bemoaning the indolence of her youth and casting about for a means of support, Catharine wrote her father, "I feel anxious that Harriets mind should not be left to run to waste as mine has & should feel a pleasure in taking care of her education."⁶ This sentiment modulated naturally enough into thoughts of founding a female school in Hartford with her sister Mary.

Edward Beecher was already in Hartford; as principal of a primary school he could funnel likely students to Catharine and Mary when they reached the appropriate age. Lyman Beecher, who believed scholarship to be “the best use the Beechers can be put to,” and a course of action likely to open the “greatest usefulness for you & perhaps for Harriet also,”⁷ encouraged his daughter’s plans and urged that she apprentice herself to the Rev. Joseph Emerson, known for his progressive views of female education. Catharine, however, declined to enlist a male mentor and set out alone, “equipped only with her own ideas.”⁸ Her ideas bore the strong imprint of her experiences at the Litchfield Female Academy, a point confirmed by the complaint of John Brace that Catharine had “all her life . . . taken my best ideas, and by her imitations run away with the credit.”⁹

Catharine Beecher’s first attempt at creating an American institution bears some characteristic features of her work: emphases on efficiency and professionalism, both of which were meant to promote greater freedom, dignity, and independence for women. Her first stroke was to accept no girls under the age of twelve—“all young ladies and no children”—thus relieving herself of many tasks which, while not unrewarding, required great stores of time and patience. Just a year after the school’s inception her scholars numbered upwards of thirty and she and Mary “established a system of classification & mutual instruction so that we are confined only half the day.”¹⁰ As soon as increased staffing allowed, Catharine instituted a division of labor that enabled teachers to concentrate on one or two subjects in the curriculum, a system, she remarked, “of essential advantage both to pupils and to teachers.”¹¹

The most remarkable feature of Catharine’s school, however, was its form of government—suggested by her phrase “a system . . . of mutual instruction.” From its origins as a kind of Beecher family project to its self-conscious articulation under Catharine’s visionary leadership, the Hartford Female Seminary exemplified a collegial, egalitarian polity.¹² The self-conscious valuation and articulation of a school of equals was the result partly of principle, partly of necessity. In the beginning necessity was uppermost. Catharine created from nothing a school that in a few years had a specialized curriculum, an imposing neoclassical building, and a national reputation. Because neither she nor any other woman had been educated for the work, she not only had to do it all herself, she had to learn how to do it as she went along. Thus she was principal, teacher, student, business manager, housekeeper, moral guide, and fundraiser all in one. These duties, she pointed out, in a well-endowed male institution would be divided among many qualified people. She had two choices: to continue to run the school on her own energies until she gave out in exhaustion, or to use her energy to train others in the tasks that she alone could not hope to sustain. She quickly turned first to her sisters and then to the likeliest pupils, making them “teachers” and “assistant pupils.” This was all the more necessary because, owing to the deficiencies in her students’ preparation, they came

to her with no certain skills and she had to divide them into many different recitation classes, each of which required someone to hear and correct their work. With the aid of assistant pupils, an efficient and decentralized system of remedial education was put in place.¹³

Harriet Beecher was quickly drafted into this cadre of assistant pupils. As the beneficiary of John Brace's improved curriculum, Harriet's formal training surpassed Catharine's. When Catharine found her with time on her hands to write poetry, she set Harriet the task of teaching Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, "a task for which she had been fitted by listening to Mr. Brace's lectures at the Litchfield school."¹⁴ At the same time Catharine took seriously her intention to supervise Harriet's education. Her first assignment to her charge was anything but frivolous: Harriet Beecher would learn Latin. On September 10, 1824, soon after she had settled into her lodgings at Mrs. Bull's, Harriet wrote to her Nutplains relatives: "I do not study any thing but Latin for the present am almost through the grammar I study mornings and afternoons and *read* in the time between five oclock and dark and *work* the *evening*."¹⁵ Catharine's decision to teach Harriet Latin was a bold declaration of her belief in the capacity of women's minds to cope with the most difficult of the traditional subjects in the male curriculum. Having herself learned Latin from her brother Edward, Catharine read with Harriet "most of Virgil's Aeneid and Bucolics, a few of Cicero's Orations, and some of the finest parts of Ovid."¹⁶ Harriet's letters during the next few years are sprinkled with Latin flourishes.

Catharine probably felt more freedom to experiment with her sister's education than she did at first in her school at large. She was still feeling her way in an educational system that, even at the college level, relied mainly on rote recitation. She later recalled the task of checking how much students had memorized as "a painful and distracting dream." Her "only pleasant recollection" of her early experiments, she wrote, was "my own careful and exact training under my most accurate and faithful brother Edward, and my reproduction of it to my sister Harriet and two others of my brightest pupils."¹⁷

Catharine used her own family experience to gain leverage against the educational machinery of the larger culture. The Beecher family provided a mixed-sex culture in which, at the sibling level, a rough equality prevailed. Although gender distinctions were made within the family, daughters were often exposed to the same influences as sons. In addition, the fact that Catharine was the firstborn tended to equalize gender distinctions: she enjoyed the confidence and support of her father to an extent that probably would not have been the case had her birthorder been different.¹⁸ It is undeniable that the sons enjoyed educational privileges in the outside world—Isabella remarked bitterly that, while all her brothers had college educations, "cost what it might," no daughter of Lyman Beecher "cost him more than \$100 a year, after she was sixteen"¹⁹—but the Beecher children treated one