

SLAVERY EXPOSED: UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

170 years ago this month in Boston, a publishing phenomenon burst upon the world, the likes of which this country had never seen before nor since. It was “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and it changed the way Americans understood their country. It confronted the nation with the unpleasant truth about slavery as it was actually experienced by the three million enslaved blacks in the South.

Even though “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” had already appeared as installments in a newspaper, the book sold 10,000 copies sold in the first week, and 300,000 in the first year, just in the US. In Great Britain, 1.5 million copies were sold in a year. It has been translated into more than 70 languages.

The author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was the diminutive wife of a Congregational theologian and a sister and dear friend of Henry Ward Beecher. Born in Litchfield, Connecticut in 1811, she had lived for 18 years in Cincinnati, Ohio, where her husband was on the faculty of Lane Theological Seminary—and just across the Ohio River from the slave state of Kentucky. Money was tight, and Harriet often wrote short pieces for publication.

“Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was Harriet’s response to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. The legislation horrified Northerners, who were now required to assist in returning runaways—required by law to do something they considered deeply immoral. Runaways were not permitted to testify in their own behalf, and officials were better compensated if the defendants were sent South. The legislation was precipitated by the end of the war with Mexico, with the US acquiring land where the status of slavery would need to be determined. The South, with only half the population of the North, saw its representation in the Senate as essential to protecting slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act was the South’s price for the admission of California as a free state.

The legislation was imminent just as Calvin Stowe, Harriet's husband, was relocating to Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. As Harriet preceded him east, everyone everywhere was talking about the slavery debate and proposals. En route she paid long visits to friends and family, including her brother Henry, with whom she had been close ever since the death of their mother when 5-year-old Harriet became the "little mother" to 3-year-old Henry.

It was typical in large families for children to form close friendships with siblings near them in age, and Henry and Harriet formed such a bond. And they looked enough alike that as teen-agers they once swapped clothes and fooled people. Although she never lived in Brooklyn, Harriet paid long visits to Henry, and she joined Plymouth Church in 1858, remaining on the membership rolls until her death. She staunchly supported Henry during the Tilton controversy.

Calvin joined Harriet in Maine just a week before the birth of their last child, Charles, on July 8, 1850. The Fugitive Slave Act went into effect in September 1850, and by February 1851, Harriet knew she wanted to write about the life of slaves in the South. During a Communion service in church that month, she "saw" the death of Uncle Tom, almost as if in a vision, and wrote it down when she got home. Calvin insisted she write the entire story with that as the conclusion. So in March she wrote to her publisher, Gamaliel Bailey, in whose anti-slavery newspaper her pieces often appeared, proposing a serial which would show what slavery was like for persons trapped in it. He encouraged her, and the first installment appeared on the front page of *The National Era* on June 6, 1851.

Although *The National Era* had a small circulation, it seemed as though in no time everyone knew about the story, even in remote villages. The papers were passed from family to family and were read aloud. By September Harriet had a contract for the book.

For those readers the issue of slavery was not "runaways." It was Eliza crossing the ice to save her 5-year-old son from the slave market. It was her husband, George, mistreated by his owner who resented George's intellect. Would Eliza and George make it safely to Canada? It was devout Tom, saying good-bye to his wife and children when he was sold South to settle his owner's debts. Would he ever see his children again? It was the frail

elderly black woman in a slave market, begging in vain to be sold along with her last son, and repeating that “Mas’r allers said I should have one.” It was the young mother, on the riverboat taking Tom South, who drowned herself upon discovering that her baby had been secretly sold. And it was whether Tom could live out his deep Christian faith despite being beaten at Simon Legree’s sugar plantation.

“Uncle Tom’s Cabin” has long been in the public domain, and can easily be found online, both text and audio. Its plot can be summarized as the adventures and travails of two slaves from the Shelby plantation in Kentucky: Eliza who escapes, Tom who accepts being sold South to save the plantation from foreclosure. Spoiler alert: Eliza and George are discovered in Canada by his sister, now a rich widow, who sends them to France for George’s education. But Tom dies shortly after the Shelbys’ son arrives at the Legree plantation with funds to redeem Tom.

Harriet Elisabeth Beecher was born in Litchfield, Connecticut on June 14, 1811 to Lyman Beecher, a prominent minister, and his first wife, Roxanna Foote.

Harriet was well educated, thanks to her sister Catharine’s Hartford Female Seminary. She married Calvin Stowe in 1836 in Cincinnati, Ohio. He strongly encouraged her writing career. They had seven children, only three of whom outlived their parents. In 1852 she was lionized during a five-month visit to Great Britain. After a brief tenure at Bowdoin, Calvin joined the faculty of the Andover Theological Seminary and the family moved to Andover, where Harriet wrote the concluding episodes, which included a chapter with specifics and proof of various incidents in the book, which she later expanded. Upon Calvin’s retirement in 1863, they moved to Hartford, Connecticut, into a house which is now the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center on Forest Street. Calvin died in 1886 and Harriet in 1896.

As those of us who lived through the Vietnam Era know, for a country to successfully prosecute a war, it must have the support of the homefront. During the Civil War, Northerners endured four years of a horrific conflict knowing it could be ended as soon as they consented to the continuation of slavery. President Lincoln was only jesting when he suggested that Harriet was the little woman who started a big war. It would be more fitting to say that she was a little woman who helped the North understand why

they were fighting, why their sacrifices were worthwhile, and why they must persevere. Together with her brother Henry, she helped enlighten and strengthen the North for the fight to save the country and uphold its ideals.

Edith Bartley

