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UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

by Harriet Beecher Stowe, edited by Christopher Diller.
Broadview, 628 pp., £??, April, 978 1 55111 806 2

STOWE IN HER OWN TIME

edited by Susan Belasco.
Iowa, 283 pp., £??, May, 978 1 58729 782 3

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Harvard, 588 pp., £6.95, May, 978 0 674 03407 5

IN NOVEMBER 1850, Harriet Beecher Stowe, a 39-year-old minister's wife and mother of six, author of *The Mayflower; or Sketches of Scenes and Characters Among the Descendants of the Puritans* as well as a number of stories with titles like 'Trials of a Housekeeper', received an extraordinary request. Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of the *Godey Lady's Book*, where Stowe's stories were published, was assembling a biographical dictionary of 'distinguished women', and asked Stowe for information and a daguerreotype to use in an entry under her name.

That night Stowe read Hale's letter aloud 'to my tribe of little folks assembled around the evening centre table to let them know what an unexpected honour had befallen their Mama'. She confessed, in her reply to Hale, that she had 'diverted myself some-

what with figuring the astonishment of the children should the well known visage of their mother loom out of the pages of a book', and thought the idea 'quite droll'. But she concluded, with 'sober sadness', that 'I do not see how anything can be done for me in the way of a sketch.'

As a result, Harriet Beecher Stowe was missing from Hale's *Woman's Record* when it was published in 1853. By then, however, her face was well known far beyond the family dinner table. She'd given up writing for the *Lady's Book*, impatient with its limited range of topics and causes, and had begun a work of fiction, 'much longer . . . than any I have ever written', as she told the editor of the anti-slavery weekly the *National Era*, proposing its serial publication there. She thought this would 'extend through three or four numbers', and told him she

aimed to expose 'in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible' the evils of slavery.

In fact, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly* ran to more than 40 instalments published over ten months, from June 1851 to April 1852, and when a two-volume edition of the work went on sale 12 days before the final episode appeared in the *National Era*, its first printing of 5000 copies sold out almost overnight. Reading one of those copies on a crowded train from Boston to Washington, DC, the newspaperman and politician Horace Greeley decided to leave the train at Springfield, Massachusetts, and check into a hotel for the night, so that he might hide his convulsive sobbing over the novel's death scenes.

In mid-April, Stowe's publisher John Jewett announced that 'three paper mills are constantly at work, manufacturing the paper, and three power presses are working 24 hours per day, in printing it, and more than one hundred book-binders are incessantly plying their trade to bind them, and still it has been impossible, as yet, to supply the demand.' Within a month, 50,000 copies had been sold, and Jewett calculated that 'it has taken 3000 reams of medium paper, weighing 30 lbs to the ream – 90,000 lbs of paper' to produce them. 'The weight of the books when bound,' he estimated, 'would amount to 110,000 lbs or 55 tons.' Eight months later George Sand wrote in an enthusiastic review for *La Presse* that 'it is no longer permissible to those who can read not to have read it.' By January 1853, with nearly 300,000 copies sold in the United States and more than a million in Britain,

where the absence of an international copyright law enabled a multitude of unauthorised editions, Putnam's *Monthly* reported: 'Never since books were first printed has the success of Uncle Tom been equalled . . . it is, in fact, the first real success in book-making.' The only title that sold better was the Bible.

Stowe believed that the death of her mother when she was five made it easier for her to sympathise with the plight of slave children separated from their parents. Her discovery that a black child she had taken into her home school was a runaway, and her subsequent delivery of the girl to freedom via the Underground Railway, gave her material. The loss of her small son in a cholera epidemic taught her about the pain of being parted from a child. A 'vision' in church of a slave being tortured to death, praying for his master as he died, begged to be written down. Finally, Stowe's anger, widely shared in the North, at the passage in 1850 of the Fugitive Slave Law, which required citizens in free states to co-operate in the return of runaway slaves, made her feel that 'the time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak.' Yet Stowe's work on *Uncle Tom*, her 'fever-dream of injustice', as David Bromwich describes it in his introduction to the new Harvard edition, was also driven by ambition: a quality as shocking in her time as the sexual exploitation and torture she described so graphically in the novel. Just as powerful a motivator as her hatred for slavery, was the 'sober sadness' that had led her to conclude that she didn't deserve to be in-

cluded in the register of 'distinguished' women.

Stowe was the seventh child of a prominent minister, Lyman Beecher, whose brothers were also well-regarded ministers and whose oldest sister, Catharine, was even more influential, through her popular advice manual, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, and her successful campaign to recruit and train female schoolteachers in the West. All the Beechers opposed slavery; it had been the subject of many sermons by the brothers since Lyman's optimistic 1834 sermon to the American Colonisation Society: 'The day hastens, when every yoke shall be broken, and the oppressed go free.' With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law abolition became the family cause. Stowe's son Charles would recall that it was an outraged letter on the subject from her younger half-sister Isabella Beecher Hooker, the most radical of the clan, saying that she 'would write something that would make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is', if only she knew how, that made his mother decide to write about slavery. As Charles recounted, she 'rose up from her chair, crushing the letter in her hand, and with an expression on her face that stamped itself on the mind of her child, said: "I will write something. I will if I live."'

The most important word in her sister's challenge was 'feel'. Stowe knew that the flood of anti-slavery pamphlets hawked on street corners in every Northern city had done little to change anyone's mind – or heart. The pamphlets were graphic, but northerners had become inured to these

catalogues of abuse, and southerners were already hardened. They did nothing to make the slaves seem like real individuals or to make the 'patriarchal institution', as Stowe and many others called slavery, vulnerable.

Three years before she began [?] *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe had published an essay called 'Feeling', in which she outlined her view that 'sympathy' was the defining characteristic of 'human beings, having hearts that can suffer and enjoy; that can be improved, or be ruined'. And, although she had grown up in a pious household where all fiction but the novels of Sir Walter Scott was banned, she knew that fiction was the medium through which sympathies could be aroused and feelings appealed to, stimulated, even altered. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe aimed to do something the pamphleteers could not. She would serve as a 'painter' of word pictures. 'There is no arguing with pictures,' she explained to her editor at the *National Era*; 'everybody is impressed by them, whether they mean to be or not.'

And so Stowe set to work conceiving vivid characters and scenes: the fugitive Eliza escaping to freedom across the ice floes with her son in her arms; noble Tom whipped to death in a squalid shanty by Simon Legree, a man who boasts 'Ye won't find no soft spot in me, nowhere'; little Eva, the too-good-for-this-world plantation owner's child who sighs, 'these things sink into my heart,' then breathes her last as the family's slaves gather to mourn at her bedside.

Stowe had told her editor that she planned to 'show the best side' of slavery –

hoping to draw in the proslavery readers she aimed to convert – ‘and something faintly approaching the worst’. The result was a double-stranded plot beginning on a Kentucky farm, just south of the Ohio River and the Underground Railway route to freedom, where Tom manages the farmhands and Eliza works in the kitchen. Their kind-hearted master has fallen into debt and, despite having vowed never to sell any of his slaves, finds himself forced to do so or lose his land. Tom, his most valuable worker, must go, and Eliza’s young son, Harry, is thrown into the bargain. When Eliza hears of the sale, she decides to escape with Harry, but Tom submits to his fate, demonstrating the ‘manly disinterestedness’ that Stowe wished to show her readers was a character trait not exclusive to white-skinned males. Indeed, her subtitle, ‘Life among the Lowly’, the reader quickly understands, is meant to be taken ironically; the term ‘lowly’, sprinkled throughout the book, begins to attach more readily to the white slave-traders and bounty hunters, the genteely cynical or brutish slaveholders.

The book’s main title is more puzzling. In the opening chapters Tom must leave his cabin – and with it his wife and children, the community of slaves whose religious leader he has been – and so it vanishes from the story as Tom travels south, sold first into the benevolent St Clare household in New Orleans, where Eva becomes his special charge. Her death results in his second sale, this time at auction, to the merciless Simon Legree. While Eliza and Harry are making their way north to freedom in Canada, to be joined by Eliza’s husband, George,

Tom withstands repeated tests of his ‘manly disinterestedness’. These end in his martyrdom at the hands of Legree after he has aided a woman’s escape and dies in the beating he receives as punishment.

Around the edges of the narrative, Stowe exhorts, bullies, shames, cajoles and preaches, as all Beechers could. At the end of a chapter called ‘An Incident of Lawful Trade’, in which Lucy, a slave whose child has just been sold, drowns herself rather than endure the separation, Stowe addresses her reader:

‘But who, sir, makes the trader? Who is most to blame? The enlightened, cultivated, intelligent man, who supports the system of which the trader is the inevitable result, or the poor trader himself? You make the public statement that calls for his trade, that debauches and depraves him, till he feels no shame in it; and in what are you better than he?’

‘Are you educated and he ignorant, you high and he low, you refined and he coarse, you talented and he simple?’

‘In the day of a future Judgment, these very considerations may make it more tolerable for him than for you.’

The book’s message is that we are all culpable until slavery is eradicated, we are all sinners who must seek salvation through good works. It was the inevitable day of reckoning at Heaven’s gate that mattered to Stowe.

Surprisingly, the book was out of print when, 11 years after its publication, Stowe visited President Lincoln to urge him to sign into law the Emancipation Proclamation. She supposedly received this greeting: ‘So this is the little lady who made this big

war?' The novel returned to print later in the century – there had been 150 editions worldwide by 2009 – but now there was less interest in what she wrote about slavery and more in the book's literary merits. George Sand described it in her 1852 review as 'essentially domestic and of the family'. The novel 'has faults', she allowed, but these 'exist only in relation to the conventional rules of art, which never had been and never will be absolute'. Stowe 'is all instinct', Sand wrote, 'it is the very reason that she appears to some not to have talent . . . I cannot say that she has talent as one understands it in the world of letters, but she has genius, as humanity feels the need of genius – the genius of goodness, not that of the man of letters, but of the saint.' Sand thought the book's literary quality beside the point: 'We should feel that genius is heart, that power is faith, that talent is sincerity, and, finally, success is sympathy.' Henry James thought Stowe's novel was 'much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness'. He supposed that since it had been 'printed, published, sold, bought and "noticed"', it must be seen 'as a book', though it was really more like 'a wonderful "leaping" fish' that 'had simply flown through the air'. This fish, according to James, had not managed even 'the exposure of some literary side'.

A generation later, Edmund Wilson showed only grudging respect: 'What is most unexpected is that, the further one reads in *Uncle Tom*, the more one becomes aware that a critical mind is at work, which has the complex situation in a very firm grip . . . Out of a background of undistinguished

narrative, inelegantly and carelessly written, the characters leap into being with a vitality that is all the more striking for the ineptitude of the prose that presents them,' Wilson marvelled, borrowing his verb from James. 'They come before us arguing and struggling, like real people who cannot be quiet.'

At the time of publication, African-American critics had largely reined in their objections to Stowe's essentialist disquisitions, and her use of homespun dialect, in deference to the anti-slavery fervour her book had inspired as the country lurched towards war. But by the mid-20th century, James Baldwin would have none of it. His essay 'Everybody's Protest Novel' gave *Uncle Tom* – 'jet-black, woolly-haired, illiterate . . . robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex' – the bad name that stuck for most of the rest of the century. At the same time, the novel ceased to be studied in American colleges and high schools. Mark Twain's nostalgic account of antebellum Southern life, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, was instead elected the Great American Novel – despite its own sometimes objectionable use of dialect and the fair-weather friendship of Huck and his slave companion, Jim.

In his introduction to a 2007 edition of Stowe's novel, Henry Louis Gates tried to rehabilitate Tom, and affirmed both his sexuality and the novel's 'submerged discourse of arousal'. Stowe's gambit, Gates thought, had been to make abolitionism sexy, in the hopes that 'men might embrace anti-slavery politics because their wives expected better of them'. These two new edi-

tions further the peace-keeping effort with introductions that emphasise the novel's redemptive qualities and Stowe's 'message of racial reconciliation', as Christopher Diller puts it in his immensely helpful treatment.

It would be safe to say that Stowe's aim in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was good works, not great literature, yet her pictures still illuminate and provoke. On Twain's Mississippi River 'You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft,' but Stowe's Red River, bearing its boatloads of enslaved human beings, haunts the imagination with the knowledge that, as she wrote in *Uncle Tom's* defence – 'this is not novel-writing – this is fact':

The boat moved on, freighted with its weight of sorrow, up the red, muddy, turbid current, through the abrupt tortuous windings of the Red River; and sad eyes gazed wearily on the steep red-clay banks, as they glided by in dreary sameness. At last the boat stopped at a small town, and Legree, with his party, disembarked.