

The Library of America interviews Joan D. Hedrick about Harriet Beecher Stowe

In connection with the bicentennial of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview with Joan D. Hedrick, author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*.

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Uncle Tom’s Cabin stands as one of the most influential books ever published in America. In his essay on Harriet Beecher Stowe in Patriotic Gore, Edmund Wilson remarks on the phenomenon that in the first year after its publication on March 20, 1851, the book sold 305,000 copies in the United States—and another two and a half million worldwide—yet following the war interest in the book waned and he claims that it was out of print for most of the first half of the twentieth century. How do you account for its immense popularity and then its eclipse?

It is true that the novel’s popularity declined in the first half of the twentieth century, but like the Bible, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has never gone out of print. Its unprecedented success in the nineteenth century derived in part from Stowe’s skillful combination of popular genres with which her audience was familiar: the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, sentimental fiction, the slave narrative, and the oral traditions of the sermon, political rhetoric, minstrelsy, and the vernacular, including dialect. By packaging her antislavery message in these highly entertaining genres and packing them with dramatic action and sharply drawn characters, Stowe got behind the defenses of her readers and held slavery up before a jury of the civilized world.

The novel was immediately translated to the stage, and “Tom plays” ran continuously for the next ninety years. This second life of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

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was in part responsible for the decline of its reputation in the twentieth century. Grafted onto the minstrel tradition, the stage versions of Stowe's novel often portrayed Stowe's hero as a shuffling, humorous Sambo. The Christ-like pacifism that ennobled Stowe's Tom appeared to many in the increasingly confrontational racial politics of the twentieth century as subservience, or as James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1912, "foolishly good"—behavior that became branded as "like Uncle Tom." Stowe's literary reputation, very high in the nineteenth century, was also declining as modernist critics viewed the work of Stowe and other politically motivated women writers as "melodramatic" and "sentimental."

In your biography of Stowe, you describe in some detail the literary parlor society that was very much a part of Stowe's life for almost fifty years. What role did those gatherings play in stimulating and influencing her writing?

Harriet Beecher's exceptional education took place not only in at the Litchfield Female Academy and the Hartford Female Seminary, but also in the informal activities that went on in the parlor. In the days before radio and television, families made their own after-dinner amusements, including reading aloud stories and poems written for the occasion. Women had perhaps even greater access to these literary sports than men; participating in literary games and writing letters to distant family members were considered extensions of women's role to nurture family bonds.

When the Beechers moved to Cincinnati in 1832, Harriet was invited to join a literary club, called the Semi-Colons, which met in the parlor of Harriet's uncle, Samuel Foote. Members' literary contributions were read aloud, anonymously, and then discussed and criticized by the group. One can imagine how useful such an apprenticeship must have been to an aspiring writer. Perhaps even more important to Harriet Beecher was the intimate nature of this gathering. She could see the faces of her audience and observe what moved them, what made them laugh, what reminded them of the New England many of them had left behind. She developed what would become the hallmark of her prose, an intimate narrative voice. Moreover, the semi-public space of the parlor gave her important access: her first story appeared in the *Western Literary Messenger*, published by a member of the Semi-Colon Club.

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While staying in Kentucky in 1833 Stowe is said to have witnessed a slave auction. She started writing Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1851, one year after Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, which prohibited anyone from helping slaves escape. Did Stowe actually participate in the Underground Railroad? Can you give us a sense of how her feelings about slavery developed?

The Beechers moved to Cincinnati in 1832, a time when slavery was a hotly contested national issue. That Cincinnati was a border town, situated just across the Ohio River from the slave state of Kentucky, made the subject of slavery particularly volatile. Students at the Lane Seminary, where Harriet's father Lyman Beecher was president, suspended classes for eighteen days in 1834 to debate whether "colonization" (sending the slaves back to Africa) or "immediate emancipation" (simply freeing the slaves) was the better approach. Two years later a mob attacked the printing press of James Birney to prevent him from publishing his antislavery newspaper *The Philanthropist*. Other heralds of the contradiction of slavery in a democratic country were the fugitive slaves who made their way across the river to find work in Cincinnati. When the Stowes learned that one of their domestic servants was being pursued by her master, they drove her to a stop on the Underground Railroad and helped her escape. Some of Stowe's most graphic information about slave life came from former slaves whom she employed as cooks and laundresses. Unlike many of her siblings, Stowe was not actively involved in antislavery societies, but the eighteen years she spent in Cincinnati were the seed time of her epic novel.

In 1849, the Stowes' eighteen-month-old son, Charley, died of cholera. Harriet later wrote that there were circumstances of such bitterness in the manner of Charley's death that she didn't think she could ever be reconciled to it unless his death allowed her to do some great good to others. She also wrote that losing Charley made her understand what a slave woman felt when her child was taken away at the auction block. Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to encourage citizens to disobey what she took to be an unchristian law and to arouse the compassion of white parents, many of whom, she knew, had lost a child. Believing that Americans' "hearts were better than their heads" on the slavery issue, she knew where to aim her arrows.

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Legend has it that when President Lincoln met Stowe in 1862 he said, “So this is the little woman who started the great war.” Do we know what actually happened during their meeting?

In 1862 Stowe traveled to Washington to meet with President Lincoln to assure herself that he was serious about proceeding with the Emancipation Proclamation. The meeting between the tall, lanky president and the literary woman who stood less than five feet gave rise to the story, told in family biographies and often quoted, that Lincoln greeted Stowe with the words, “So you’re the little lady who wrote the book that started this great war.” One would give a good deal to know the details of this meeting, but the accounts leave almost everything unsaid. Stowe wrote to her husband Calvin, “I had a real funny interview with the President . . . the particulars of which I will tell you.”

Uncle Tom’s Cabin was the second book Stowe published. She went on to write more than a dozen other books. Are any of these interesting reading?

After the international success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe became a professional writer. Of the thirty volumes of her work, four of them are New England novels that established the emerging genre of what has been called “regional literature”: *The Minister’s Wooing*, *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, *Oldtown Folks*, and *Pogonuc People*. There are wonderful elements in all of these, but to me the most interesting are *The Minister’s Wooing*—like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, written in response to the death of one of her children—and *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, the closest thing Stowe ever wrote to an autobiography, though with an ending very different from her life. She also wrote an important anti-slavery polemic, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and another antislavery novel, *Dred*, whose hero, modeled on Denmark Vesey, the slave who led a revolt that massacred white plantation families, was cut from a different mold from her hero Tom. [The Library of America volume [Harriet Beecher Stowe: Three Novels](#) contains *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Minister’s Wooing*, and *Oldtown Folks*.]